

# **BREAKPOINT**

*A Patreon-exclusive novel  
by Corrupting Power*

## **Part One**

### *Len*

Waking up in freefall wasn't a *common* occurrence, but Len would be lying to himself if he thought this was the first time he'd done it. Third or fourth time, maybe.

It wasn't as though he was hurtling towards the earth with no protection. Hell, he wasn't even hurtling *alone*. He was strapped in with three other men into what seemed like a large yellow life raft of some kind, although he could tell from the wind rushing around them that they were descending downwards and that the edges of the raft were affixed to some kind of parachute.

'So we're falling,' Len thought to himself. 'That's a start.'

The parachute had slowed their descent so they weren't going crash down, but parachuting with a raft wasn't generally the softest of landings. The other men hadn't woken up yet, which gave Len a bit of time to size up the rest of his situation.

They weren't the only parachute he could see, a number of large crates dripping down around them, pontoons attached, so they wouldn't sink, which made Len look down over the edge of the raft to see a wide swath of ocean beneath them. At that point, he looked around him and to the horizon in nearly every direction was nothing but endless blue water, although he did see a retreating C-130 off in the distance, which he assumed they'd been thrown unceremoniously from a couple of minutes ago.

The one exception to the limitless water was just a few miles off in one direction, there was a large island with what looked like an inactive volcano along one side of it, covered in lush, dense forest, probably no more than 60-70 square miles in total. It was literally the only thing they'd be able to get to before they died, so he was already thinking about how to gather up the crates and head over towards the island when he saw a small boat coming from the island towards their general vicinity, which only made sense when he thought about it. It looked like a pretty short range boat, though, which meant there was likely no way it would have fuel enough to get to somewhere populated. It felt like they were probably somewhere deep in the Pacific Ocean, but he'd know more after getting a look at the stars at night. That plane, he guessed was probably the only thing that ever passed by this island.

When the raft touched down on the water, the impact shook the other three men into consciousness, and Len could see utter confusion and shock on their faces, far more than he'd had. Clearly the Jumble had done a much more thorough number on them than it had on him, although he also had to admit it was possible that at least one of them played for The Other Team, something he meant professionally and not sexually.

"Who the hell are you?" one of the men said to him, a big bulky blonde Australian who looked like he was definitely more brawn than brains.

"Len." He unfastened himself from the harness he'd been strapped in and started pulling the parachute up and onto the raft. The last thing he wanted was for it to get caught in the undercurrent and to drag them down before the little cigarette boat could reach them. "You?"

"Oxford," the giant Ozzie said back to him, moving to help him in his task. At least the man knew enough to be useful instead of sitting around with his thumb up his ass. "Know where we are?"

"Nope."

"Know how we got here?"

"Nope."

"Some fucking help you are, mate," Oxford grumbled. It immediately made Len think Oxford

was Other Team potential. The obvious assumption was that they were all, literally, in the same boat, and that none of them would know anything, and by acting like someone else should know something, instead of deflecting attention from Oxford, it made Len turn the spotlight of suspicion back on the Aussie. "What're you two called, Frick and Frack?"

Len had to work not to smirk, as the other two men did look vaguely similar enough to maybe be brothers, Eastern European if Len had to guess, but that was a stab in the dark at best. Grizzled. Unshaven. Unpleasant. He'd known plenty of their kind over the years. Hell, he'd killed plenty of their kind over the years. By contrast, it was hard to hide his Midwestern heritage, although sometimes he got mistaken for German because of the blonde hair and the blue eyes. Very much a sharp contrast to the two somewhat similar looking men, who seemed to take offense to Oxford's comment.

"Vigo," the first one, slightly taller and older, said.

"Dicu," the second one, slightly shorter and younger, said, his accent much thicker than the other's. Hungarian, if Len had to guess. "I do not know this man, or either of you." There was actually a better-than-average chance of that being true, although whether or not that had been true a week ago was anybody's guess.

"Bully for you," Len said. "Grab an oar and let's start paddling over towards those crates. The boat's got to be coming to get us and them, so we might as well make it easier for them."

"Who put you in charge?" Oxford asked indignantly.

"Nobody," Len shot back. "But if you want to sit around being as useful as a vestigial tail, I'm sure the people on the island will look very kindly on that, don't you? I'm willing to work for my supper and get where we need to go with a little elbow grease."

Oxford grumbled in response, but picked up one of the plastic oars and started help slowly move the raft over towards the nearest floating crate. There were about half a dozen of them and they had only gotten the raft over to the second of them when the sleek little white boat pulled up near them. There was a very well tanned dark haired man in a half-open luau shirt at the wheel of it, and a couple of good looking women in bikinis sitting in back, one blonde, one brunette, both tanned, busty and friendly looking. "You fellas need a hand?" the man said to them as one of the women, the blonde, tossed a tow line over to them. She was gorgeous and the bikini was doing very little to hide her sizable assets. She also looked familiar, and Len thought he might know her from somewhere, but it was also possible the whole thing was just evoking nostalgia in him. It almost looked like a commercial to sell someone a boat or a summer holiday, Len thought to himself. "Secure that to the raft, and then buckle yourselves in, 'cause I ain't wasting much time out here if I can help it."

The man didn't have to tell Len twice, and the other men seemed to fall in line quickly, making sure the tow line was wrapped around two separate anchor points and wouldn't just flip over if they started going too fast. Once the tow line was attached, they all strapped themselves back into the harnesses just before the boat started whipping out towards the rest of the crates.

One at a time, the boat would pull up alongside one of the floating crates, attach it to a tow line, then move on to the next, until the four remaining crates were part of the convoy, in addition to the raft and the two crates already attached to it.

Len glanced over and noticed that all the men on the raft were dressed exactly as he was, in a dark blue flightsuit with workman boots, and a white muscle t-shirt on beneath it, which he could tell as all of them had unzipped the flightsuits down because of the goddamn heat. It had to be late afternoon, and despite the ocean around them, it was ridiculously hot, the sun beating down on them not helping matters any. Of course, they'd been in an aircraft's belly less than fifteen minutes ago, and Len suspected it had been much cooler in there, not that he could remember.

As the boat zipped them over towards the island, Len could finally start to get a better sense of what the lay of the land was. The trees were thick and heavy almost right up to the sand line, but he could see hints of buildings just beyond the ridge of them, with a few parts that he expected were trails or roads. There was also a deck extending out from the island, although it was hard to make out, since

it looked like someone had camouflaged it so that it wouldn't be recognizable easily by an orbital satellite unless someone was taking a serious look and studying the coastline for a while, all of which was highly unlikely for some random island in the middle of the South Pacific.

This, of course, made total sense. Whatever they were doing here, the people who had put them here, whoever the hell *they* were, didn't want anybody unexpected dropping by.

There were storm clouds gathering on the edge of vision, and Len suspected it would be upon them before any of them knew it. It made him glad they were being towed back to the island rather than having to paddle out to it. There wouldn't have been any guarantees that they would have made it before the storm would've overtaken them, and then it would've been anybody's guess if they'd had a shot getting ashore.

He knew a little about where they were heading, so he spent much of the short trip inward wondering which of his raftmates were Employees and which were Guests, like him. He had to suspect at least one of them was at least an Employee, if not Management, but these things were likely to be intentionally obfuscated, otherwise what was the point? Oxford felt like the most reasonable candidate to be Employee and not Guest, but he didn't want to lock into that too early based on initial impressions. The guy could've just been an uptight asshole, and the Jumble would make everything a bit more unpredictable upfront.

As the boat pulled them closer to shores, he saw that a handful of people had come out, diving into water to help pull the crates up onto the beach, dragging them up far enough to break them down and load them up onto the backs of a couple of small trucklike vehicles that clearly weren't actual trucks. The first give away was that they weren't gas powered. They seemed more like oversized golf carts to Len, something he immediately filed away for further study later.

The two women were tending to the boat as the man hopped off it, walking over to them, helping pull them onto the dock one at a time. Up close, Len could tell just how good the camouflage was – it would've easily been glossed over by automated satellite scans, and it was big enough to cover the boat when it wasn't in use. “C'mon fellas,” the man told them. “Let me welcome you to Honeywell Island, give you the dimestore tour and help you pick out your commodes.”

When Len started to try and get out of the boat, the last to get out, the blonde woman leaned down and offered him a hand, pulling him up onto the dock personally, instead of the man. She had a strong grip and tugged him to stand alongside of her, making sure he moved in close, her body almost right on top of his. “My name's Sally, big stack,” she said with a grin of pearly whites, leaning in so that he could feel her nipples, all stiff and tensed, through both his jumpsuit and her forest-green bikini top. “Once you get situated, drop me a line and maybe I can give you the *extra* special tour.” She licked her lips and swatted him on the ass as she scooted away. Len was *definitely* sure they'd encountered each other somewhere before, although he still couldn't quite place his finger on it.

“What the hell is this place?” Oxford asked, as Vigo and Dicu stretched their legs, as if maybe they'd been in cramped positions for a while. Nobody had anything with them to take out of the boat, so they were mostly just waiting for the carts to get loaded up.

“That's the million dollar question, one that I truly can't answer for you fellas,” the man said. “Didn't catch any of you boys names. They call me Tex.”

Len did his best not to laugh. If this guy was a Texan, then Len was the last son of a dying planet called Krypton. Sure, the man did a good impression of the accent and he certainly exuded Texan swagger, but there were enough little missteps along the way that Len would bet his last dollar that Tex was anything *but* Texan. Still, best not to call him out on it on the first day, especially since he was clearly the only person who seemed like he was self-identifying as Management.

“I'm Len, that's Oxford, Dicu and Vigo's the crabby one there in the back,” Len said, as Tex climbed into the driver's seat of a six seater doorless car that was waiting for them. “At least, that's what they told me in the raft, 'cause I don't know these guys from last week's dinner.”

“Can you *remember* last week's dinner, Len?” Tex asked him.

The fact that Tex knew enough to ask that question made Len even less comfortable. "...no."

Tex tapped one of his massive fingers against his temple. "Keep that in mind. Everybody here's got that, to some extent. For some of us, it's nearly a completely blank slate. For others, it's only maybe ten to twenty percent missing. None of us remember how we got here, but we've pieced bits of it together over the last several years."

"Pieced?" Oxford asked.

"Several *years*?" Vigo followed up.

"Sure," Tex laughed. "We been here quite some time. Imprisoned, maybe, or maybe just forcibly vacationing. I know what you're thinking – what kind of prison doesn't have guards? Well, first, we're not entirely sure it *is* a prison. It *probably* is, but if it is, what did we do to get sent here? Who sent us here? How long are we here for? And if what we did was really so bad to get banished to somewhere in the South Pacific, why not just kill us off instead?"

"Well, you clearly know enough to come by and pick up new arrivals," Dicu said, echoing Len's own thoughts.

"Didn't know there was going to be new arrivals until we saw the raft come down. Once a week, there's a supply drop, crates tossed out of a C-130 that doesn't have any markings and doesn't slow down. Usually it's food, booze, clothes, basic survival staples, but some of the time it includes new arrivals like you boys. My crew always makes sure to pull the supplies onto shore and drags 'em into the center of town, where people come and pick up what they want. Then once a month, we haul all the dropboxes back out to sea, attach a skyhook line and a balloon to them, and they pick up all the empty boxes for next month's shipments. Deflated rafts passengers are sent in too, along with the parachutes. There's always instructions on how they want it done the week before the pick up."

Tex was driving them down a gravel path that clearly saw a decent amount of cart travel, as it had been cleared away and had plenty of clearance on either side, despite being in the middle of a goddamn tropical jungle.

"Who's 'they'?" Oxford asked.

"Shit, son, you tell me!" Tex laughed, reaching over and slapping Oxford on the back of the shoulder. "I been here two years now, and I'm no closer to that answer than I was when I got here. I've checked all the messages they've sent us dozens and dozens of times, trying to figure out who the fuck these cowboys are, but nothing about who they are other than a simple signatory – Management."

"You aren't Management?" Len asked.

"If I was Management, boy, I'd either be telling you a whole lot more or a whole lot less," Tex said, bringing the cart around a bend, keeping them in line with rest of the convoy. "I'm just an old hand who's learned how to look out for himself."

"So what's in it for you hauling the boxes into town?" Len continued. "Why not pull them out of the water and just leave them there on the edge of the treeline?"

Tex grinned, pointing at Len. "You're the smart one of the bunch, I see. Well, we get first choice of all the stuff before we haul it back, so I take the best booze for my bar, but it also means we get books and albums before anybody else does. And making people go out to the dock just convinces more of them to dick around with the boat for a little bit before they realize it'd never make it to anywhere civilized. Most of my team are relative newcomers, still convinced they're going to find some clue about who's doing this in the drops, but shit, I gave up on that pipe dream a long time ago. Now, I'm just happy enough to lay out the welcome mat for the newcomers, give them the tour, put them up in lodging and make sure nobody's going to rock the boat."

"What is this 'rock boat' of which you speak?" Dicu asked, the idiom clearly lost in translation, but Tex seemed more than happy to elaborate.

"Troublemakers don't last long around here. Sometimes they vanish in the middle of the night. Sometimes we find a dead body in the center of town. But you got yourself a bunch of spooks, spies, soldiers, mercs, madmen and mischief makers around here, so we don't even bother with police," Tex

said. "Problems have a way of sorting themselves out, even without much in the way of weaponry."

"Noticed you don't carry a gun," Oxford said.

"No guns anywhere on Honeywell," Tex replied. "We've got machetes and knives and the like, but this ain't no wild west Annie Oakley gun show here. That'll take you boys a bit of getting used to, I imagine, since you all strike me as the sort of fellers who like to sleep with a gun underneath the pillow. But you'll learn. If you're killed at a distance, it's most likely gonna be a bow and arrow what done it."

The cart pulled out of the jungle and into a clearing full of what looked like thirty or forty buildings, none more than three stories high, sprawling out towards the edge of the jungle in all directions. Above them, however, the tree cover was still basically intact, the trees bending inward to soak up all the available sunlight they could get, only small amounts of it dripping into the clearing in shafts and beams.

All of the architecture was stark and made of heavy concrete, although there were balconies scattered everywhere. The buildings themselves were likely sixty or seventy years old, as the heavy vines running along the sides of them implied they'd been here for quite some time. More than anything, however, what caught Len's eye was the excessive amounts of neon. Each building had its own neon sign – some labeled things like Residence Hall C or Commissary – but a handful of them in languages he couldn't read. Most of the buildings had more than one sign, though, with half a dozen on the most covered structure. The colors were a struggle for control and dominance over the eye, all of them casting enough light to suffuse the air with the prismatic shades. It was like Blade Runner, Miami Vice, Hong Kong and eighties Soviet propaganda photos had been thrown into the wash together, and this secluded jungle city was the end result.

"Quite the look," Len said, as the cart pulled into what seemed like the town square, a couple of the carts that had followed them moving along side a raised stone circle.

"It was that way when we got here," Tex replied.

"Even the signs?" Oxford asked.

"If one of them burns out, there's a replacement in the next shipment but I've never seen people asking for them on the request lists, so clearly somebody here's got a way to ask for things on the sly," Tex said. "But I'll be damned if I can figure out how. Maybe the drop boxes have hidden storage compartments, although I feel like I've gone over every inch of them with a fine tooth comb. We've tried leaving notes asking for tools or medicines in the drop boxes, but they're mostly ignored, although occasionally they'll send large things upon request if we can convince them the need is great and that we can't cause too much trouble with them." He glanced over his shoulder at the guys and girls who were starting to unload the carts, placing the boxes one at a time into the raised stone circle. The pontoons had been stripped of them, and all of them had been opened, so clearly Tex's people had taken some things from them before they'd gotten to the town center. "Look for boxes marked 'Len,' 'Oxford,' 'Dicu' and 'Vigo,'" he called out to the people, before turning back to them. "You'll each have a box worth of clothes packed for you in the shipment, stuff in your sizes. Might even be some of your original clothes; might not. See if any of it strikes a memory when you get a chance. Might help fill in some gaps. Has for some people. Not so much for most of us, though."

"You said you run a bar 'round here?" Len asked, as Tex was watching all the crates get moved from the carts to their spaces along the inside of the circle, although sure enough, each of them had a large steamer trunk with their name stickered on the front brought over to them and loaded onto Tex's cart. There were a handful of people starting to come out of the buildings, heading over towards the boxes within the circle, so Len supposed it was for the best they didn't get a chance to try and scavenge their clothes from them. "How do people pay? There some local currency? Shells or something ridiculous like that?"

"Nobody pays for anything here," Tex said. "Not really. I mean, there's some bartering going on here and there for specialized services like special cooking but for the most part, people are just happy to have something to do. So if you want to cook in the commissary, you go right ahead, just make

enough for ten to twenty. Same's true for putting in some time in the mail room, working laundry detail or clean up and maintenance. You put in at least 10 hours each week in one of the common jobs, each month you can request one item that'll come in within a month or two – book or record. You can be broad or specific and generally those requests get delivered. We include all requests with a work log that goes into the monthly pickup they do. And they know if you did the work, so don't think you can lie and just get stuff for free. There's cameras all over the island, although nobody knows where they go. We tried breakin'em once, but they were just repaired the next day and the next supply drop was full of nothing but empty boxes and a note that said 'Stop that.' We had to conserve food like hell for the next month to adjust for an entire week's worth of missing food, and hunger'll drive folks into desperate shit. Ain't nobody messed with the cameras since, and people just do their work and get their stuff. But if you don't have any special requisitions and just want to eat whatever's been made for the day there? You can do that too. You want a drink? Come by the bar and I'll mix it up for you, no charge. The only currency I trade in is the only one that matters – information. You'll see a big neon sign over my place that says 'Tex's Bar.' Didn't ask for the sign – just showed up one day, so I guess whoever's running the show likes me doin' what I'm doin'."

"That's all of it, Tex," a black girl in a red bikini that didn't cover a whole lot said to him. Her hair was in a loose afro that she clearly had worked hard to keep from getting out of control. "Your boys got their boxes and we've got the circle filled out." She had on sandals, but most of the people on Tex's team were wearing boots. "We're going to take the rest back to the bar while you finish playing welcoming committee."

"Got it," the big burly man said. "I won't be long."

Behind the black girl, Sally gave Len a wave and blew him a kiss before turning to walk away from them, letting Len get a spectacular view of her toned ass beneath that green bikini bottom. She and the rest of Tex's people hopped back onto the two trucks and started heading towards the far side of the small town.

"How many people are here?" Oxford asked.

"You four will bring us up to sixty-seven, but who knows how long that count'll remain."

"There's places for all of us to stay?" Vigo asked.

"There's one hundred residences here on Honeywell, give or take a few extras, each one with a king or queen sized bed, so I suppose max capacity's two hundred, though we've never even come close to that. I'll give you guys unassigned units, but if you don't like where you're staying, you can take any other open unit and just let me know, so we've got a directory of where everyone's shacking up. None of the doors on the island have any locks, so better get used to that."

"None of them?" Len asked with a raised eyebrow.

"None that I've found," Tex replied, "other than the bunker door."

"The bunker door?" Vigo asked.

"There's a small heavy metal door up along the side of the volcano that nobody's ever been able to do anything with," Tex laughed. "You're welcome to try and get it to open if you want, but in two years, nobody's gotten it to budge a millimeter. We call it the bunker door 'cause it reminds most of us of those old bomb shelter doors. Damn thing's impenetrable, and doesn't even seem to open from this side. If somebody's in there, they ain't come out that we've seen."

"Were you the first here?" Len asked.

"Nope, but at this point, I think I've been here pretty close to the longest," Tex replied.

"Everybody who was here when I arrived has either died or disappeared. So I guess I'm the big winner or loser, depending on how you look at it."

"Why the directory?" Oxford said. "If nothing matters all that much, why keep track of where folks is shackin' up?"

"Because it doesn't hurt to know where everyone is. Also, people hook up all the time, and when they do, they usually start sharing a living space, which lets people know to stop hitting on

them,” Tex said with that ever-present wide grin on his face. “Lots of people around here choose to spend their time getting drunk and screwing, and who can blame 'em?”

“You got somebody, Tex?”

“Yup. Paulina, the brunette you saw in the boat with me when we picked you up. Been together about four months now. We'll see if it takes, but it's been pretty smooth sailing so far. She's Russian and I'm from the US of motherfuckin' A, but we ain't let that get in the way of nothin' yet.”

“Your first girl here on Honeywell?” Len asked.

“Sheeee-it, son,” Tex laughed. “My sixth. Most of the others are gone, one way or the other, although Jenny's still around. She's hooked up with Mayday these days I think.”

“You got somebody here calls himself Mayday?” Oxford asked in surprise.

“Well, *we* call him that, 'cause he's spent most of his time here trying to find some way to reach the outside world, all to no avail,” Tex said, his voice layered in amusement at the man's apparent futile efforts. “He's persistent, I'll give him that, but then again, so're most rashes. And shit, what's it to me how someone chooses to spend their time? He wants to wander the beaches praying to see a passing by boat or plane, that's his life to waste.”

“You said 'gone one way or the other,’” Len said pointedly. “What did you mean by that?”

“Couple of'em turned up dead, one stabbed and the other beaten.”

“Squabbles between inmates?”

“Maybe,” Tex said. “Or maybe the warden saw somethin' they didn't like, an' took'em out in the middle of the night, left the bodies out to convey a message to whoever'd been up to mischief with them. Never really certain. The other two went missing, which could mean any number of things.”

Len leaned against one of the concrete structures, tilting his head slightly. “Like what? Humor me...”

Tex shrugged, the question clearly no skin off his back. “Sometimes people go stir crazy, try and swim off the island. If we hear about it, we'll go try and find'em with the boat, but it's a big fuckin' ocean. And I suspect there's also a small contingent around here that knows a lot more than they're telling, the guys behind the guys, if you will. Secret Management. The wardens in inmates' clothing. I wish I could tell you I was one of'em, but I'm just a guy who tends to his bar and stays outta most folk's way. Not everybody who goes missing dies, that much I'm sure of. Just don't know much more beyond that. Maybe they make it off the island and back to the real world. Maybe they're here and beyond the hatch. Maybe it's something else entirely.”

“Couldja be any more cryptic, mate?” Oxford asked in annoyance.

“Dunno,” Tex shot back, a smug grin on his face. “Want me to give it a go?”

Tex brought the cart to a stop in front of a building with a green neon sign identifying it as “Residence Hall F.” There were a handful of carts parked out front, each connected to the wall by a thick cord.

“The carts are free for anyone to use?”

“Yep,” Tex responded. “Max speed of 35 kph, which is a little bit more than 20 miles an hour. They're full electric and fully rechargeable, so if you use one, just make sure you plug it in wherever it is you're going. Don't fuck around with'em otherwise. I know for certain that they take that shit seriously, and trying to muck around with civic utilities will definitely get you whacked. If it breaks, just send a message to central telling them where the car's broken down, and someone'll come and fix it. Vehicle maintenance is one of the public service teams you can work for if you want.”

“What do you mean 'message to central?’” Oxford asked.

“I'll show you, c'mon,” he said, getting out of the cart, rain starting to trickle down from the heavy foliage above. That storm Len had seen on the horizon was likely upon them now, although the dense trees prevented it from coming down too hard at once. He suspected there was a rainwater catcher somewhere on the island, which provided the drinking water. “All four of you should leave your bags here, and whichever of you decides you want one of these units can just get your bag when we come

back down. Let's go.”

Tex led them inside of the building, the interior of which had a strange late 60s early 70s décor, although thankfully there wasn't a hint of shag carpet as far as the eye could see. There was also an unusual mix of nationalities in the styles, Polynesian influences blending into foundations from both sides of the Iron Curtain. The interiors were far, far newer than the building structures themselves.

“How come nobody wants these units?” Oxford said. “Something wrong with'em?”

“They're a little bit further from the center of town than most people like being, but other people prefer that sort of thing,” Tex replied. “Other than location, all the residential halls are basically built on the same template, just with a few tweaks here and there. Four units per floor, three floors per building. Two of the four units on the top floor of this building are taken, and one on the bottom, but all the rest are open. Here, we'll look at this one, and show you.”

He pushed open a door and led the four men into a sparsely decorated apartment. While most of the men were probably just admiring the décor, Len was doing a bit of heavy thinking. All of the furniture was custom-built – no mass market stuff, nothing produced in bulk. It was also likely all built on site, nothing having been shipped here except maybe the raw materials. The buildings themselves were likely also constructed the same way, although it was possible that there had been some large construction machines here, though that would've had to have been over half a century ago.

Len's read on the island was that it had maybe been a remote military base for either Russia, Germany or Japan during WWII, but that it had probably lay dormant after being abandoned once the war was over for a few decades. There had likely been a second wave of inhabitants, researchers or scientists in the late 1960s or early 1970s, who had retrofit the place to make it seem a little less foreboding, but there was only so much that could be done with the early brutalist architecture. The endless tiny cameras scattered all over the place, and the electrical grid the place seemed to be running on had to be very modern inventions, and with Tex saying he'd been here a bit more than two years, Len would estimate the third wave retrofits couldn't be more than five years old, tops.

What was most impressive about all of it was that nothing was discarded, just built on top of, adding and adding without ever removing, so everything just kept evolving, giving everything a very surreal but organic feel, despite the harsh edges of the buildings themselves. Even the jungle itself seemed to be doing what it could to incorporate and embrace the community, rather than resist it.

“All this could be yours!” Tex laughed, doing an impression of a game show host, sweeping one arm to show off the interior of the place. “Your own couch, dining room, kitchen and bedroom!”

“Is not truly ours if anyone can walk in any time,” Dicu grumbled. “Do not like idea of having no privacy in own home.”

“Like I said, boys, it's something you just gotta get used to,” Tex said with an apologetic shrug. “I mean, if it makes you feel any better, you could barricade your front door from the inside, since the doors open inward, but it's still no guarantee that someone won't get in anyway. Plus, y'know, no locks the windows either, although I suppose you could probably build latches on those if you really wanted. It just seems like more trouble than it's worth to me. What do you have that's worth stealing? Am I right?” he laughed.

“No phone?” Oxford asked, looking around the place in confusion. “I thought you said we should just contact central if there's a broken cart.”

“Well, I specifically phrased it as 'send a message,’” Tex said with a chuckle. “We've got a different approach to communication here on Honeywell.”

“No goddamn way,” Len muttered, walking over to the wall. “I don't know that I've ever fucking seen one of these in person.” He reached forward, placing his hand against one of the two clear pipes he found there, feeling it hum a little beneath his touch.

“Yeah, me neither, before I got here anyway,” Tex said, “but 'round these parts, it's the only communication system we got. No phones, no television, no computers, no radios. Just good old fashioned pneumatic tubes. Each housing unit's usually got between five and ten empty pill capsules in



it. You ever need more, you can simply walk over to the mail office, or use your last one to request them to dispatch you a handful and they'll send you one every five minutes for half an hour, so you've got time to unload them and so they don't jam up the pipe. Some of the more updated systems only have one pipe for both send and receive but our system's a bit older than that. Left side is outgoing, right side is incoming.”

The two tubes each had a clear hatch over them, so that it was apparent there was nothing in them at the time. There was a box mounted on the wall next to it that he opened, taking one of the capsules out. They were hard cylindrical containers with rubber feet on either end to ensure a seal, but other than that, totally clear, maybe twice the length and diameter of the cardboard center of a roll of toilet paper.

“You put whatever is it you want in the capsule, you wrap one of these light blue sheets of paper around it with the name of the person or office you want it to go to in the little 'recipient' spot on one side, seal it up, toss it into the tube, close the hatch and away it goes, off to the mail room, who'll look at where the person is staying and then redirect it to their residence. Bob's your uncle. The art of letter writing lives again. Or you can just walk over and tell people things. That works too. But this is also how you file for media requests if you're doing public service work.”

“Everything fair game?” Len asked. “Nothing too edgy or revolutionary?”

“Sure seems that way,” Tex sighed, shrugging his shoulders a little bit. “You'll notice each unit here's got a record player in it, so all music'll show up on vinyl, for better or worse. That means if it ain' on vinyl, they ain't sendin' it, but seems like vinyl's amid a resurgence, so that helps. The more specific your request, the more of a chance you're going to be disappointed, but hell, sometimes they surprise us. Hell, just two months ago, we learned we'd been fucking ourselves for no good reason since we got here, and that was a goddamn game changer.”

Len grinned, tilting his head to one side. “Sounds like a hard earned lesson. What happened?”

“Well, we figured there was no point in asking for current news, right?” Tex said, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment. “Sure, couple of the fellas had asked for Playboy or Penthouse mags, and those had come, but they were generally just randomly chosen issues that had to be ten or twenty years old. Then Mayday decided he wanted to try and push, so he spent a full forty hours of a week doing as much service as he could – cooking, cleaning, the mailroom, groundskeeping, you name it, he did it. And for his request, he put 'a current US newspaper.' We figured he wasn't going to get shit, y'know? Just chalked it up to Mayday being dumbass ol' Mayday.”

“And?”

“And... in the next package, there was a copy of the July 22<sup>rd</sup>, 2007 edition of The Cincinnati Enquirer, full and uncut. It was even a Sunday edition, with the funny pages and everything. Our guess is that it's a couple months old. He didn't want to share at first, but after reading the whole thing for a couple of days, he decided it was fine to share, so it's been passed around. Since then, every week, we've gotten some kind of newspaper or magazine, all summer of 2007, some English, some Russian, some German, some French, some Japanese, some in Mandarin, some in Arabic, a couple in Farsi... So our guess is that it's probably either autumn or early winter of 2007. That jibe with what you boys can and can't remember?”

“I remember,” Dicu said, “day I was taken, was November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2007. That was maybe two weeks ago? Since capture, time grows... fuzzy.”

“Good,” Tex said, snapping his fingers, pointing at the man. “Good. That's good. That's useful. Mid November, 2007. That lines up with what we've been able to figure out. I dunno why they won't just give us a calendar set to today's date, but maybe they like the level of mystery and suspense they can keep us all in.”

“Controlling the flow of information is always something you can leverage,” Len said. “C'mon. We all know that. Let's not pretend like we don't have some basic knowledge about where we've all come from and why we're all probably here.”

“The fuck you mean, cowboy?” Oxford said to him, annoyance plain on the Australian's face. The more and more Oxford talked, the more certain Len was that the man was an Employee, and not a Guest. He didn't strike Len as smart enough to be Management, though.

“We're all operators and troubleshooters of some kind. I may not remember where I came from or who I used to work for, but there's enough tradecraft floating around inside this brain of mine that bubbles up to the surface so naturally that I think being a spy's second nature to me. Like breathing. Probably been that way for half my life. So if you lot want to pretend that you're not here – either directly or indirectly – because of our day jobs in some regard,” Len said. “That's fine. You go on and do that and see how far it gets you. But you won't catch me trying to downplay my own abilities. We're all spooks here, ain't that right, Tex?”

Tex smirked but nodded in his direction. “That's about right, Len,” he confirmed. “Everyone on this island is either ex-military, ex-intelligence or, most commonly, both. We think. Not everyone remembers their past very well. We've got a handful of people with some pretty nasty brainfry, or at least they claim to. Seems pretty genuine to me, but, like you said, we're all operators of some kind, and I wouldn't put it past anyone to spin tall tales in order to keep their past private. But something like that's hard to keep up as a long game. So, any of you feel like you want to bunk up here?”

“I want to see all my options before I make any decisions,” Oxford said. “I'm betting we're all the same.”

While Dicu and Vigo nodded, Len offered a shrug. “Nah, no need for me to keep looking around. I think I'll bunk up here, although I'll take one of the units on the third floor rather than down here on ground level.”

“Any reason?” Tex asked him.

“What can I say? I like a nice view, and being a bit away from town center appeals to me.”

“Then you should take unit three. One and four are both taken already, and while the view from two's okay, you'll get a better looksee from three,” Tex said. “Go get your bag and I'll meet you up there. I'm just gonna send a message to the hub, marking you as here.”

“Right. Be up in just a second. C'mon boys,” Len said with a grin. “I'll walk you back to the cart.”

The four of them walked out of the unit, letting the door swing closed behind them as they headed to the cart. “You think you're Mister Cool, don't you?” Oxford said, giving a shove to the center of Len's back. “I got my fuckin' eye on you, boy.”

Len didn't flinch at the push, shrugging it off as they arrived at the cart, taking his trunk off the back of it before sighing, turning to look at Oxford. “You *trying* to get your ass whipped?”

Oxford clearly took that as provocation, adopting a fighting stance. “C'mon, pretty boy. You've got a face that looks like ain't seen a propah fight its entire life.”

Len shook his head a little, pushing his trunk over to one side. “I'm willing to let you back down with no harm no foul, Oxford,” Len told him, a resignation to his voice. The amped up muscle bound Goliath had been itching for a fight from the moment he'd woken up, and it hadn't taken much in the way of nudging to get it turned onto Len. “I'm ser—”

Mid-sentence, Len saw a cannonball of a fist chugging his way and so he simply leaned to one side, reached up, grabbed onto Oxford's wrists and instead of providing resistance, yanking him with even more force, adding to the energy already in the swing, pulling the man forward and off balance. Oxford stumbled forward, bringing his feet out to try and regain his balance before turning back to look at Len, who was still looking as casual and relaxed as he had before.

The punch hadn't worked, so Oxford decided to charge Len, both of his arms wide, deciding to use his size to make sure Len couldn't move left or right to escape the grapple. Which, of course, was why Len didn't go left or right, but instead rolled onto his back, tensing up his right hand to punch the Australian in the kidney as he sailed over Len's body resting comfortably on his back on the paved road, the giant crumpling when he landed, his arms cradling to prevent his face from hitting the

pavement too harshly.

Len flipped himself back up and onto his feet, making the movement look graceful, not even winded or bothered as he looked over to Oxford, shaking his head. "Done yet? Or do we need to keep this going a bit longer?"

Oxford growled as he stood up, his arm folded protectively over the spot where Len had just hit him. "You watch yourself," the man said. "I know where you sleep now, and you can't exactly lock your doors, can you?"

"You're right, I can't," Len said with a confident smile. "Of course, you can't exactly fly when I throw you off my third story balcony, can you?" He glanced around the area a bit. "I could probably make sure the small of your back hit that metal railing over there. Decent enough chance to break your spine, and even if it doesn't, gonna take you a hell of a lot of time to heal up to try again. And that entire time you're healing up, I can wander up to you and end your life in between heartbeats."

"Taking on an injured man?" Oxford said in anger. "Real fucking fair."

"You were one planning on coming after him in his sleep," Dicu said to him, apparently amused at how quickly Oxford was trying to play the aggrieved party.

"Shut the fuck up, Commie!" Oxford moved to hop into the front passenger's seat of the cart, the one Len had sat in on the ride over, as if that was some minor victory for him.

"Is all talk, no stick," Dicu said to Len in amusement, jerking his head to Oxford behind him, as they both laughed. "See you around."

"Maybe we can all meet up at Tex's bar tomorrow," Vigo said. "Doesn't hurt to have a few friends in a new place."

"Well, let's not go crazy throwing around words like 'friend' so quickly," Len chuckled. "But sure, I'm game for drinks tomorrow night. Take care of yourselves, fellas. And watch your backs around that guy. I'm betting he works here and isn't just a guest."

Len grabbed his trunk and yanked it towards the stairwell, walking up the stairs which were easily the most barren part of the building, each of the stairs almost too sharp at the corners, certainly far more dangerous than would be in a modern building. He made his way to the third floor and saw the hallway ran back and forth, a door on either end, and two doors offset in the middle. The door to his place, which was marked by a huge sharp metal 3 on the door from shoulder height to knee height, almost taking up most of the metal doorway. True to Tex's word, while there was a handle and a latch, there was no lock or keyhole. He opened the door and hauled his trunk inside of the apartment, finding Tex standing there over by the pipes.

"This place look good to you? Just want to be sure before I send the message to central," Tex said to him, holding the capsule in his hand, clearly having already written the note. Len almost wanted to tell the man he'd changed his mind, since he'd already done the work, but the view looking out over the city's bed of neon from his third story window was too good to pass up.

"Yeah, it'll do," Len said. "If I don't like it, I can always move after a few days. Plenty of other open places you said."

"Sure are," Tex replied, slotting the capsule into the chamber before closing the door on the pipe. A moment or so later, the capsule made a fwoomp noise as it shot down the tube and towards wherever the hell the main sorting center was. "You need to find me, I'm in one of the four units above my bar, number 2. You can also just put Tex's Bar and it'll make it to me."

"Got it," Len said to him. "I'll try not to be too much trouble, and maybe I'll be by the bar tomorrow to take a look at this place of yours."

"Oh, you'll be trouble, friend," Tex said, with a chuckle. "You're all trouble, one way or the other, in the end." He moved to the door, stopping to look back, a devilish twinkle in his eyes. "But then again, so I am. Be seeing you, friend."

And then he headed out, letting the door closed behind him, giving Len a chance to explore the space that was going to be his home, such as it was. True to Tex's word, none of the doors had locks on

them in any way. Not the front door, not the bathroom door, nothing. The unit had a small living room with a couch and two chairs, a kitchen, a small dining area including a table and four chairs, a bathroom with a very elegant if spartan glass enclosed walk-in shower including a pair of large towels, and a bedroom with a king sized bed. The bedroom also had two hampers and a note over them that read 'Laundry is picked up and dropped off the day after the weekly supply drop.' That made a certain amount of sense, that everything on the island was timed around the one singular event they could always predict.

There weren't any clothes in his unit, but he could see little tiny markers that someone had lived in here at some point, the silverware not entirely aligned perfectly, a Britta filter in the fridge that was half filled. Nothing that seemed too recent, but nothing that he would have pegged as more than a few months old. Maybe Tex really was telling the truth and people did come and go a bunch.

From the living room, he heard a thwoomp sound and he couldn't help but chuckle a little. It wasn't anything he'd expected about this island, but it certainly did have a very satisfying tone to it when a capsule arrived. He moved over to the tube marked "receiving" and opened the compartment, taking out a capsule before closing the door back up.

The capsules reminded him a bit of the old cylinders that he vaguely remembered his mom using at a bank drive through what felt like lifetimes ago, and maybe the warm sense of delight he felt was associated with that, he thought to himself as he took a moment to figure out how to open the damn thing. The address part simply read "Len," so he had to assume he was unique with that name on the island, not that that surprised him in any way.

Opening the capsule he found a single folded sheet of paper, and it was certainly seeped in perfume, because a blast of citrus and floral notes practically blasted him in a face when he opened the capsule. He unfolded the sheet of paper and saw a short note in elegant cursive handwriting.

*Come join me for a drink soon as you can. Above Tex's bar. Floor 3, unit 4. Sally*

Beneath her name, she'd drawn a heart. The woman was laying it on thick, but he'd expected *someone* to upon his arrival. The first assault, then. He unpacked his trunk, hanging his clothes up, most completely unfamiliar to him, but he lingered on one luau shirt in particular, a sky blue and white, patterned with orchids all over it. There was a memory associated with it, he could feel it clawing at the back of his skull, and as he held the shirt longer, it came back to him.

Scarab had just finished its first mission with its newest member, Harry, a milk run that had absolutely gone tits up within minutes of deployment, but Harry, as nervous as the rookie had been, had held together and shown that while he might *sound* like a wreck, he was still able to keep his head about him, and had been an excellent addition to Scarab.

As a thank you for being able to see the good among the slightly scrambled impression that Harry had given off, Harry had given him a shirt, this shirt, the one he now held. "Because you've always seemed too cool for school, boss," Harry had said to him in that posh English accent that he hadn't managed to shake himself of quite yet.

The memory fell apart as quickly as it had come together, but it was good to know that he still had enough core retention that he could recognize his teammates should he see them again. He took off the jumpsuit, put on a pair of khaki shorts and the shirt, just because he felt like if he kept it on, maybe it would rip more of his lost memories from the fog.

Len didn't see any reason not to go see Sally tonight, especially since she was on the way of where he'd intended to go, anyway.

The storm was certainly in full swing above them, and the rain was seeping down in strands and gushes, the heavy tree coverage above making it impossible to tell how the water might drip down, so Len did his best to sprint over to one of the carts, climbing into it. Thankfully, the charging area was covered, and the carts themselves mostly had little canopies atop of them. He unplugged the cable, hung it up on the charging station and then started to back the vehicle out. It reminded him of a golf cart, more than anything.

As he drove down the path, suddenly balls of light sprung to life around him, and he realized that the automated streetlights must have been kicking in, giving the path more illumination, something it certainly needed as the rain continued to dominate the landscape.

One thing he noticed as he approached Tex's bar was that the charging station next to the bar itself was already completely full, a number of carts having moved to line the wall next to it, and it took Len a few minutes to find a place where he could safely put his cart without blocking anyone else's path in or out, which was good, because it gave him an excuse to be around the back side of Tex's bar.

The back side of the building had a dumpster for refuse and an area for composting, so it was clear they made sure to waste as little as possible on Honeywell Island. He made a point of wandering over to the dumpster like he was going to throw away the letter Sally had sent him, but mostly that was just an excuse to look behind the left corner of the number. Either he'd find a letter or letters scrawled there, or nothing.

He'd mostly expected to see an M scratched into the metal surface, but instead he found an R, which surprised him, but at least he knew who to look for now. Next to the R, he quickly scratched a deep L, then tossed the paper from Sally into the dumpster and moved it forward again. He suspected he might have been seen in his actions, but that was okay. Some things they'd expected to get caught in, and this was one of them. It wasn't a huge amount of information anyway, and nothing that Management shouldn't already know, if they'd been paying attention.

There was a stairwell leading up along the backside of the building, with no entry points on the first or second floor, just a doorway leading into the third story, where four apartments lay. Len wondered a little bit if the benefits of being right by Tex's outweighed the downside of Tex's being just downstairs. If it was even a halfway decent bar, the noise level would certainly get out of hand every now and again, and that would make a regular sleep schedule damn near impossible. He was tempted to peek into the unit that belonged to Tex himself, but the man was certainly smart enough not to leave things out and about.

While the faux Texan had certainly done his best to paint himself as a common man of the land, Len wasn't buying into the whole act, although he felt like Tex had been too consistent in his story to actually be Management or even an Employee. He wasn't entirely in the ally column yet, but the man felt like he was likely on the side of angels.

When Len reached the door of unit four, he found himself wondering about the etiquette of a place like this, considering the doors couldn't be locked, but common courtesy still won out and he knocked on the door with two sharp raps.

"C'mon in," Sally's voice said from inside. "Of course it's open."

He opened the door and stepped into the hallway, closing the door behind him before walking into Sally's living room. The layout in this unit was mirror flipped from his own, the kitchen and dining room on the right instead of the left. Standing in the dining room, Sally had put her blonde mane up into a bun, and somewhere along the way ditched her bikini top, leaving her very generous breasts exposed to his eyes, clearly defined tanlines on her flesh revealing that she didn't usually walk around without it on, large brown areola the size of teacups with hardened dark nubs in the center.

"Thought you might be hungry, so I grabbed a couple of bowls of chicken fettuccine Alfredo from the mess hall, as well as a bottle of red wine and a bottle of vodka from Tex's," she said with a laugh. "I'll take them back tomorrow morning. He won't even notice they're missing, he's got so much booze down there. Did you poke your head in yet?"

"Not yet," Len said, shaking his head. "Looks like it's quite the happening joint."

"It's nice for folks to have someplace to gather and swap stories, not that a whole lot happens here on Honeywell," she said, setting the bowls at two place settings on the table. "You want wine, vodka or both?"

"Wine's fine," he said, moving to take a seat. "Looks like you were pretty confident I was going to show up."

"If you didn't, then I'd have been losing my touch, and we can't have that, now can we?" she giggled, pouring him a glass of wine before pouring one for herself. "So how much do you remember of before here?"

"Not much," Len lied. "Tex said most people lose between twenty and eighty percent of their memory, so I guess I'm closer to the eighty."

"Well, sooner or later it'll all start coming back to you, I imagine," she said, starting to eat, clearly not standing on ceremony or saying grace. "I get little flashes of my old life here and there. I guess I was a pilot or something, not that there's anything to pilot here."

'Yes, you were,' Len thought to himself.

"So you work with Tex at the bar?" he asked her.

"Mmm. Some of the time. I'm also one of the ranchers, tending to the chickens and pigs that we're raising. There's plenty of wildlife on the island, too, but it helps to keep some in captivity that we can always turn to for fresh meat," she said. "They send some in dry ice sometimes, but keeping things chilled around here isn't exactly the easiest proposition. Shit, I think that's why Tex's is so popular. He's got the industrial strength ice machine, so you can always swing by for a cold drink."

"Even in a place with no money, it's good to have a stranglehold on the market," Len laughed.

"Well, each of our fridges has an ice maker in it, but they aren't all in the best of shape, and they can't do all that much at a time."

"Where's all the power come from?"

"Combination of wind, water and thermal power," Sally told him. "There are some wind turbines up on the mountain, and there are some water turbines that charge batteries off the ocean currents, but we're pretty certain there's also some sort of heat to power conversion going on in the mountain, which we think used to be a volcano. Maybe still is. Nobody's sure. As long as it works, people are incentivized not to care too much."

The two ate dinner while very cautiously trying to ply the other for information about their backgrounds, Len giving up nothing while Sally kept trying to hint at kernels of information about herself that he knew were patently untrue.

In between bites became a game, where Sally seemed increasingly more and more direct about Len's past, making wild stabs in the dark, which Len would simply bat aside, neither confirming nor denying, something that seemed to annoy her but only made her want to press more. Being evasive came naturally to Len, and he found amusement in seeing her progressively try harder and harder to pin him down on anything.

On top of the digging, Sally also seemed to be pushing her level of flirting into overdrive, at times pressing her arms forward and together to make her massive tits swell towards his eyeline even more, as he did his best to remain calm and neutral.

As soon as they'd finished dinner, Sally came by and picked up his bowl, taking both his and hers into the kitchen, tossing them into the sink before turning on the water to let them soak for a while. Then she made her way back towards the dining area, making her way to stand behind Len, her hands rubbing over his shoulders. "C'mon, Len," she purred. "You gotta give me *something* even if I gotta *fuck* it out of you... Not that it would be that unpleasant of a task."

"I'm just afraid I don't have anything all that interesting to tell you, Sally," he said, reaching behind his chair to grab hold of one of her thighs, sliding his fingertips up and down along that smooth tanned flesh. "But you can try and squeeze me for more, if you want."

"Let's go to the bedroom, then," she said, pulling away from him, tugging on his shirt, making him get up with her movement, as the two of them headed into the bedroom, but there wasn't even a door to close between the bedroom and the rest of the apartment. In fact, Len was noticing that there were, in fact, no internal doors anywhere in Sally's place, a marked change from his own place.

He unbuttoned his shirt on the way to the bedroom, tossing it onto a chair as she tugged down her bikini bottoms, kicking them to one side. She had a small blonde stripe of hair above her pussy, and

the tan lines on her breasts had matching patterns on her hips and ass, not completely pale but certainly much lighter than the rest of her flesh, which obviously saw more than its fair share of sunbathing. She also pulled the scrunchy from her hair, letting the bun fall into a massive cascade of lionish blond hair around her shoulders as Len stepped out of his shoes, tugging off his socks. Len reached down and unbuttoned his shorts and dropped them and his boxers, leaving him naked in the bedroom with Sally, who licked her lips, looking him over.

“Whoever the hell you are, you're a fine looking specimen, Len,” Sally told him. “And I'm certain that cock of yours has done more than its share of damage over the years.”

“I don't think I'm giving anything away by telling you it's done alright,” he said to her, watching her slowly crawl up and onto the bed, looking back over her shoulder at him. “How do you want me?”

“I want you as hard as you can fucking give me,” she said, slowly backing up until her knees were at the edge of the bed. “I want you to hammer the shit out of my pussy. I want you to slamfuck me until I can't even get up in the morning, I feel so fucking bowlegged.” She reached back and slid two fingers to spread the folds of her snatch open for him. “What the fuck are you waiting for?”

Len grinned, stepping over towards the edge of the bed, lining the head of his cock up against her cunt before both of his hands clamped down on her hips as he shoved inside of her, finding her wet and eager for him, a deep, sweltering moan burbling out of her lips, a shiver running up her back as her head dropped down, her hand clenching a fistful of the sheets in her slender fingers.

“Fuck yeah, you fucking motherfucker,” she howled. “Yes yes yes fuck yes fuck fuck I want you to fucking break me open!”

His hands on her hips set a stuttering rhythm, the draw backs a bit slow only to be interrupted by hard and crushing thrusts forward, his hips smacking into her body hard enough to make her asscheeks jiggle a bit, her large tits swaying beneath her, clapping against one another as he kept on punching his dick inside of her with corkscrew shoves.

“Pound it daddy!” she whined and whimpered. “Harder harder harder!”

She was getting quite loud and vocal, and Len almost wondered if she was trying to put on a bit of a show for anyone standing outside of the bar downstairs, seeing the window was open, knowing full well the sound of it would float down to patrons not inside of the place, even with the heavy rainfall obscuring it a bit.

“Fuck daddy! I'm gonna cum! Fuck! I'm gonna cum! Oh fuck oh fuck oh shit oh holy fuck fuck fuck I'm fucking cumming! Holy fucking shit I'm fucking cumming!” Her own fingers were rubbing down on her clit, but she was also using them to flick against his balls every so often, and when she clamped down, she squeezed *tight* on his shaft, and there was only so much he could do, so he let her body begin to milk his own orgasm out of him. He wasn't sure how long it had been since the last time he'd had an orgasm, but clearly it had been a while, because it felt like he was pouring a ridiculous amount of jism inside of her, feeling it ooze out around the edges of her twat and trickle a little onto his balls. When he pulled back, he could feel a heavy drizzle of it start to pour out from her before she slumped forward onto her belly, as he moved to lay down beside of her.

After a moment, she moved to shift until her head was resting on his arm, her tits pressed up against his chest, her arm barring across his body, preventing him from getting up. “Sorry if I made a bit of a mess. I'm guessing it's been quite a while for me, so maybe I was pretty backed up.”

She sighed, covering her eyes with the flesh of his bicep. “You're really not going to give me anything to work with, are you?”

“I'll tell you one thing, I guess,” Len said, deciding to be a little generous. “We were on different sides of the same op once. Back in Kosovo, when there were five or six sides all fighting at once, nobody really knowing who to consider an ally or an enemy. But back then you were going by Anika, and you were definitely working on behalf of the SVR. I won't tell anybody, but I can't imagine Russian spies are especially popular around here, considering how enthusiastically violent you lot were back then. Still are, I guess.”

She seemed to tense up against him, biting her bottom lip. “Tell me something, Len. Fuck. Tell me anything. You don't know what they're capable of if I come back with nothing, if I come back empty handed. I need to have gotten something out of this,” she said, a dire desperation undercutting her voice. “Anything. Even the smallest thing.”

He sighed a little bit and nodded. “Alright, one tiny bit of information, but hell, it's probably something they already know anyway. Up until 2001, I played for the Americans.”

She exhaled, a touch of relief seeming to wash across her face. “Thank you. Thank you for that. It's something. It'll be enough. It has to be enough. Anyway, you can sleep here tonight, and we can talk about it some more tomorrow.”

That wasn't going to be an option, but he didn't know it when he drifted off to sleep.

### Rin

Supply drop days were always the most chaotic day of the week. Rin liked to think of them as Wednesdays, but that was just because it amused her, not because she had any real inclination that they were on actually being done on Wednesdays. It also meant that there was a chance for new arrivals in terms of people, and she smiled to herself when she saw Tex heading towards the carts, rushing out towards the boat.

It was the point where the village was the most active, with people coming from all the parts of the island to go through the weekly drop, and see what was in it. That also granted her the most freedom to move around the island without anyone noticing, since people would tend to congregate around the town center to get early picks of the new things.

Considering the supply drops were every seven days, she marked this drop as the third drop post the one she'd arrived with, which meant she'd been on Honeywell Island for about a month now. She understood why everyone wanted to rush out – they wanted to make sure they didn't miss any odd or unusual items that arrived, although most of those were in the special request crates, each item of which had a nametag attached to it. Tex's crew very much ensured that those items went to the correct people, and Rin had learned that while Tex's authority wasn't really backed by anything, it was respected by pretty much everyone. Maybe it was just because the guy was so nice.

When Tex and his team had run out, Rin used this particular moment to let herself do a thorough search of Tex's bar without anyone in it. It wasn't as though she was looking for anything to steal, but Tex had the lay of the land better than anyone else on the island, and if the man kept anything private, he would've kept it in his bar, which was only truly empty when they were running for the pickup.

The bar was decorated with all sorts of odds and ends, things that had clearly been scavenged from all sorts of parts of the island, including a couple of German war medals, some old 1960s photographs of Asian scientists of some kind and a number of cheesecake posters of both women and men plastered. The pool table saw regular use, as did the dart board, and Tex's was the only place with an actual jukebox player. Whenever people were done with records, they would take them to the archives, and Tex made a weekly trip every week, seeing what he wanted to add or remove from his previous jukebox selections.

Rin did a quick sweep of the bar, looking for any obvious hiding spots, but nothing immediately came to mind, and before she knew it, she could hear the sounds of carts returning to the area, so she decided she needed to split, ducking out the back door.

From the corner, she peeked around and smiled a little, seeing Tex with a handful of newcomers, recognizing her boss, Len, as one of them. There were plenty of holes in her memory, but there was no way she was ever going to forget how he'd pulled her ass out of the fire during that shootout in Pakistan when they'd first met. They'd been fast friends ever since, her and the rest of the members of Scarab.

Seeing Len warmed her heart, because he'd always been the one with the big plans, and it had been his idea for them all to show up on Honeywell Island in the first place. Of course, they had been



captured individually, and when she showed up to find the place behind Max's bar with no visible markings, she knew it meant she was the first to be on site. So she committed to watching, studying and learning.

She didn't want Len to spot her yet, so once Tex took the cart of new arrivals off to find places for them to live, she headed into the town square, determined to blend in, just another Guest looking through the scraps that Management had given them for the week.

Most of the things were being sorted accordingly, but there were several things just sort of tossed in for good measure, clothes of a size to fit several people, most of which Rin didn't care about, but she saw there were pairs of socks, which she grabbed, because she'd lost a few pairs since her arrival, having used them for practical applications beyond covering her feet.

After grabbing socks, she went to put in a shift over at the canteen's kitchen, cooking up some fried rice as well as whipping up some vegetable stir fry, setting them in the buffet style serve yourself containers for people to put out. A bit towards the end of the shift, she saw Sally walking in, picking up two bowlfuls of the chicken fettuccine Alfredo, heading back out and across the street to her place above Tex's bar.

Rin didn't often spend nights at Tex's, but tonight seemed like it would be a good place to hang out, maybe make contact with Len, if they could get away with it discretely. After her shift, she headed over to Tex's place, not wearing anything fancy, but as a single woman who hadn't hooked up yet with anyone for more than a night here or there, the men didn't need her to be wearing anything fancy.

"Heya Rin," Tex said to her as she headed into the bar, which was packed, at least half the island's population hanging out there tonight, although that seemed like it happened more often than not on supply days, people discussing the new stuff that had come in, as well as the new people. "Haven't seen Danil around, if that's what you're worried about. He's probably still smarting from you shooting him down a few days ago. Went pretty hard at him, didn't you?"

"He had his hand on my ass uninvited, Tex," she laughed at him. "He's *lucky* I just sprained his wrist. I probably should've broken the whole fucking arm, but I was feeling generous."

"Hey, you don't gotta tell me twice!" Tex said, holding up his hands in mock surrender, a bar rag in one of them. "I know well enough to not touch unless I'm invited. Get you a drink?"

"Just a screwdriver," she said as the man laughed.

"What are you, a 1980s sorority girl?" he asked her.

"Sure, don't you recognize me? I was the spokeswoman for Kappa Gamma Fuckoff," she smirked. She'd actually *been* in a sorority in college, but she wasn't going to give up that piece of information without someone doing some serious digging. Most of the people on Honeywell knew that she was Asian, although they didn't know which country she was from, most of them thinking she was either Chinese or Korean. In fact, she was Asian-American, having grown up in San Diego, but she spoke Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean and Japanese fluently, and it was enough to let her pass as from any one of those regions, especially since she'd spent so much time studying them.

At some point in the night, a redhead who perhaps too on the nose called herself Ginger pulled a handful of people out of the bar and into the rain, where they could all hear the sound of Sally getting well and truly fucked senseless a few floors up, something Sally had clearly *wanted* them all to hear. After Sally orgasmed loud and genuinely enough to make more than a few of the women jealous, everyone filed back into the bar to spend the rest of their evening.

Technically, there was always someone working at Tex's, so the bar was always open, but by two or three in the morning, it had died down, and Rin and Tex were the only two still hanging around, swapping tales about some of the greatest meals they'd ever had. Given enough time, the two of them always defaulted to talking about food or restaurants. The rain had finally dwindled down to a light drizzle, meaning it would be easier for her to get back to her place without getting too wet.

It became clear that Len wasn't going to be showing up tonight, so Rin decided to pack it in and headed towards the front of the bar, stopping in the doorway, clicking her tongue with a slight shake of

her head. “Well, fuck,” she said. “Hey Tex, grab the ladder and a shovel will you?”

Hanging from a lightpost out in front of the bar was Sally's lifeless nude body, a large F carved onto her collarbone. Whatever it was she was supposed to have been doing tonight, Sally clearly hadn't done it well enough.

Tex brought the ladder and the shovel to the front of the bar before he saw her body, sighing, shaking his head. “Fucking hell. I always thought she was an Employee, but I guess even they aren't immune to someone calling them out when they fuck up,” Tex said. “C'mon, let's get her down before too many people see.”

## **Part Two**

### Rin

Putting Sally in the ground was something that Rin had expected she'd be doing eventually since the day she'd gotten here. While the woman may have been an accomplished operative before arriving on Honeywell Island, there was something about this place that could rattle anybody's cage, and Sally had always seemed like she'd been under pressure.

The woman had been around a few months longer than Rin had, but she'd never seemed to find stable footing, always seeming jumpy and on edge. It had been enough that Rin had actually gone and followed Sally around a couple of times, hoping she might catch her engaged in some obvious transfer of information, but somehow she was sending her information up the ladder some way that Rin hadn't been able to spot, or just at times when Rin wasn't looking.

Tex cut Sally's lifeless body down as it slumped to the ground atop of the pool of blood and feces beneath it. There was no dignity for the dead, and the residents of Honeywell Island saw corpses too often to give them any particular respect. Rin suspected she'd been cut into while she was still alive and then strung up and hung. Nasty way to go.

They loaded the body on top of a plastic tarp on the back of one of the carts and drove towards the edge of town where a graveyard had been constructed, although rarely did people get a tombstone or grave marker. Typically they were just put into a hole in the ground and covered in dirt. No ceremony, no words to mark their passing, just the disposal of someone who used to have a name.

Tex and Rin took turns digging the grave, wanting to make it deep, but not so deep that it would take up too much of their time. The graveyard portion of the island was under enough heavy foliage that the rain mostly didn't get in, although they were still slinging as much mud as they were dirt, it felt like. But it was better than letting the body sit out until morning.

It wasn't the first grave Rin had dug on Honeywell, and she fully anticipated it wouldn't be the last. There had been talk about other ways to dispose of bodies – taking the boat out and tossing them out at sea, but that always ran the risk of the body washing up ashore again at some point, something that Tex had told her had happened once, and nobody had wanted a repeat of that. The smell of it still haunted Vin, the man who'd found it.

Once the hole was big enough, they threw Sally's body into it, and started scooping the dirt back on top, covering her up as quickly as they could. “You know her well?” Rin asked Tex. Every conversation on Honeywell Island was always a bit of a dance, two people interrogating the other at least a little bit, trying to gain a foothold of information that they hadn't had before.

“A little bit, but not all that much,” Tex sighed, starting to pat down the dirt, making sure it was packed good and solid atop the corpse. “Like I said, I always thought she was an Employee, but she never struck me as very good at getting info out of people. Too direct, too much to the point, never enough patience or subtlety.”

“Are *you* an Employee, Tex?” Rin asked genuinely. “Are you secretly *Management*? It would explain how you got your own bar and how you seem to have your own functioning crew here, in a place where everyone is all for themselves all the time.”

“Don't I wish,” Tex laughed. “Nah, I'm just the guy who sensed an opening when he got here. Place needed a little more structure, a little more organization. And whoever it is that's *really* running things, seems they don't mind how I keep myself busy. No warnings, no threats, nobody showing up in the middle of the night to string me up or run me down. All any of us can hope for, I guess.”

“Fucking odd, not knowing who's Management, Employee or Guest here,” Rin said. “Month and change into it and I'm *still* not bloody used to it.” She liked to throw in odd slang bits from all over the world, knowing it would only add to the mystery of her backstory. The less anyone reliably knew about her, the safer her place on Honeywell Island likely was. She felt like she'd led people into thinking she was from Hong Kong for the first few weeks after her arrival before ditching most of the accent and shifting into something more eastern European. This week she'd been leaning into local London flavor, and the novelty of it was starting to wear a little thin.

“Like I told you on day one, Rin,” Tex said, smoothing the top of the grave over a bit. “Just assume everyone you meet is out to try and get something from you. Trust no one, believe nothing, and other than that, have fun. For a long time, I've suspected this is eventually going to become some spy training school or something, and that we're just the first runthroughs on breaking potential recruits, making sure those Employees among us know how to extract secrets from anyone they meet.”

“Two years is a long time to be having a 'test run' for a school, Tex.”

The two of them checked their handiwork, making sure the body was fully covered, then headed back over towards the cart, climbing into it. “There's a mistake right there,” he said, switching the cart into the on position once more.

“What's that?” she asked, as he started to bring the cart back onto the path that led to Tex's bar.

“The only reason you think I've been here two years is because I *told* you I've been here two years,” he said smugly. “I'm just as capable of lying as anyone else is. I could've gotten here literally just a few days before you did.”

“Except that you'd have to get *everyone* else's stories to line up with yours, Tex, and that's way too many false stories to keep juggling all at once,” Rin said with a certain smugness. “Beyond that, you have work logs dating back over eighteen months, so either you wasted several hours building a paper trail that I can, and have by the way, asked other people about, or you've really been here around two years time, and you're fucking with me because you think you're being clever when really, you're not, at all.”

Tex laughed slapping his knee with one hand. “Tarnation, ya done got me there, I suppose. Would've been far too much work to fake all that, and then get everyone to memorize their bits so you could check against it. Maybe I ought to burn the old work logs.”

“If you're gonna try pulling that story on anyone else, you'd better,” she grinned. “Otherwise you're just gonna keep getting caught with your hand in the cookie jar.”

“Yeah, maybe I'll retire that one particular gag,” he said. “I know the idea of having anything down in paper runs contrary to our general line of work, but it makes it feel like at least there's *some* record of what's gone down here. Who's been here, who's died or left... a record of some kind, beyond whatever the Evil Eyes have recorded for posterity's sake.”

The endless number of hidden and concealed cameras were called 'the Evil Eyes' by many people on the island. Every so often, a newcomer would try and tamper with them or track them, and it never ended well for those people.

“For all we know,” Rin said, “this could be a test pilot for some new reality TV show, like 'Love Island' or 'The Bachelor' or some such.”

Tex brought the cart to a stop back in front of his bar, moving to plug it back in, giving the machine a chance to recharge some overnight. “I can't imagine any production company being okay with the number of bodies we've accumulated over here,” he said, as he walked back inside of the bar with her.

“Audiences are getting pretty bloodthirsty these days,” Rin said, moving over to sit in front of

the bar as Tex slipped behind it, taking over for a Latino man who called himself Carlos, but was definitely trying to hide an Argentinian accent. "And you remember that old movie, 'The Running Man'? This could be like that. There could be some audience of rich folks funding this whole thing. Maybe we've even got nicknames like Fireball and Sub-Zero!"

"Maaaybe you're letting your imagination run a little too wild," Tex laughed, pouring her a shot of Jameson. "Here, on me, for helping me take care of the body."

"It's *always* on you, Tex," she chuckled. "Nobody pays for anything around here."

"Sure, but I didn't *have* to give you the *good* stuff," he said, grabbing a pad of paper and a pencil. It was just second nature for Rin at this point to be reading what he was writing upside down, but it was only what was expected – Sally's death notice.

If a body was found or a person had gone missing for more than, say, four or five days, a notice was filed with the central office, so that the housing could be marked as unoccupied and other people could move into the space. Also, it provided at least a little bit of closure as to when someone was gone. As far as Rin knew, nobody Tex had ever sent a death notice for had ever reappeared, but Tex himself admitted that some half of the time he filed one, the possibility was still there.

"Anybody have a list of all the names of the people on the island?" Rin asked him, as Tex folded up the paper, grabbing one of the pill containers from the rack beside the bar.

"Have I not been mentioning that lately? Sheee-it," Tex groaned. "Yeah, you can just drop a note for central and they'll shoot you back a handful of sheets with the most recent phonebook, although it's just names and location of residence. Nothing all that juicy." He opened the container and pushed the sheet of paper into it before closing it up once more, making his way over to the pair of pneumatic tube pipes that ran to the bar itself. Tex opened the slot, put the container into it, then closed the slot once more, and moments later the pill gave a satisfying 'fwoomp' sound as it went rushing downwards, making its way across town over to central processing. "Still, I guess if you wanted to know the name of everyone here on Honeywell, it wouldn't be a bad place to start."

"I'll make a point to file a request for one when I get back," Rin said. "Anyway, it's well past late. I should head home and get some sleep."

"Less than an hour ago you were putting a fresh corpse in the ground and now you're already relaxed enough for bed?" Tex shuddered. "I'll be up at least a few more hours, trying to shake the image of poor Sally strung up like that."

"After a while, you sort of detune from dealing with bodies, Tex, and you realize that after they're dead, there's nothing special or important about what's left behind, just a body," she said, walking towards the door, heading out of the bar.

Lots of people on Honeywell got an early start and went to bed early, to take advantage of the daylight, but Rin had been running counter to that for the past few weeks. At night, it could be harder to see and get around, but there were less people to worry about when she was exploring the island, which was what she'd been doing for at least a dozen nights.

The island itself was large, meaning she'd been forced to do her recon a bit at a time, never venturing too far from the explored areas, although as it got closer to dawn, she would push it, simply because she could always just get to high ground and figure out where she needed to head back.

Whatever the Soviets had been doing on this island during World War II, they'd certainly been committed to it, with quite the assortment of buildings all over the place. She hadn't explored the island fully, but had so far counted over forty structures. Several residences, but also more than a couple of labs, and at least a couple of what had been weapons depots at one point. There was also what seemed like a helicopter landing spot, although it had grown over heavily, with no signs of use in years, maybe even decades.

It was the cameras that drove Rin crazy, simply because there were so many of them, and attempting to cover or prevent them in most places would result in punishment or repercussions, although she'd covered the ones she'd found in her apartment, and those it seemed like were okay to

cover, or at least weren't going to bring down any sort of judgment upon them. She was willing to put up with a lot of shit, but if she didn't have to endure people watching her while she showered, she wasn't going to.

Tonight, however, she was going to go inspect the infamous steel door everyone had talked about since she'd arrived. It was the one universal mystery that seemed to bother just about everyone when they started exploring the island, and when she arrived at it, it was relatively easy to understand why it had everyone so perplexed.

To get up to it involved a good twenty minute hike up the side of a mountain or dormant volcano, it was hard to tell the difference. The door wasn't concealed – far from it. There was a well-trod path leading up to it, nothing paved, but something that saw regular foot traffic, or at least had at one point or another.

The mountain wall had a steel frame basically built into it, and it looked almost like the stone had been melted or liquefied around the frame until there was no purchase point to try and jam a chisel or a wedge into – just the slightly recessed heavy, bulky door, with no handle or mechanism on the outside of it. Based on the shape of the door, it had to swing inwards, the hinges on the inside designed to keep the door in place when it wasn't locked, which, if people were to be believed, was never.

But Rin wasn't quite so sure.

While the door was a foot or so above the ground, there were still signs of muck and dirt around the lower part of it, but the place where the mud should've been one solid unbroken piece had a slightly visible split in it, showing that the door had been opened at some point over the last few hours even, otherwise the mud would've just been one solid piece still.

She wasn't especially surprised by that, as the camera feeds clearly had to go *somewhere* and nowhere else on the island seemed like a great place for it, unless there were subterranean bunkers or something hidden in some of the structures, something that seemed unlikely but still wasn't *so* unlikely that she felt safe in ruling them out.

The door had been weatherproofed several times, as if the last thing anyone wanted was the constant exposure to rain and wind to wear it away, and she even noticed that the area of the mountain around the door had several plants that looked younger than expected, maybe transplants or things that had been added at some point to give the metal door some base protection from the elements.

As for the steel of the door itself, it was thick, ungodly heavy, like it was almost a blast shield door, or something designed for a nuclear fallout shelter. She wished Mick was here already, because demolitions was really his specialty, but until then she tried to remember some of the lessons he had reinforced in her over the years, and the number one rule of demolitions was to look for the weakest point of whatever it was you were attempting to blow up.

She was deathly afraid that when he finally got here, Mick would tell her the weak point was the mountain itself.

Rin had used a heavy-duty flashlight to get around, and she flipped it over and tapped the base of it against the steel door, a quiet gong-like sound resonating, telling her that it was indeed a door of a thickness that could only be summarized as 'No, *YOU* Fuck Off' thickness.

She flipped the flashlight back around again, and started using the bright light to sweep around the mountain outside of the door, and a few feet above the door, there was a slight reflection for a moment, something that Rin suspected was an inset protected camera pointed straight down at the door itself, so whoever was inside could have a look at whoever was standing at the door.

Maybe nobody was watching.

Maybe somebody was.

She flipped the camera off, just in case. She had a reputation to uphold.

The trip back down the mountain was a little more challenging than the trip up, made slick by the rain which had muddied up much of the trail, but to Rin, it actually made it safer, letting her get more purchase by sinking her feet in deeper.

When she got back toward the central city area of Honeywell, she stopped and took a moment to wash off her boots and pants, wringing the fabric out, making sure she wasn't tracking mud anywhere. Most of the people didn't seem to care one way or another, but Rin had made a point of making sure she wasn't leaving easy to follow tracks in her wake.

Despite it being only a few hours from morning and nearly no one being awake, the haunting ghostly glow of neon still kept the area mostly lit with a sort of haunting presence. When she'd first arrived, she'd expected there to be a flurry of activity at night, and while there would sometimes be a couple of people milling around, poking their head into places while the majority of the island's residents slept, it wasn't something they commonly did. It was more the sort of thing new arrivals did on their first few days on the island before coming to the common consensus that moving around during the day time was both easier and more enjoyable.

There were still a handful of stops she wanted to make before returning to her quarters and packing it in. The first was Sally's apartment, to see if whoever it was she'd been banging earlier in the night was still there. She tested her boots on the concrete first, making sure there weren't still mud flakes shaking off of them like fleas, and when she was satisfied she could traverse the stairs without leaving a trail behind her, she hiked her way up to the third floor and slowly pushed open the door of unit four with one hand while drawing her knife from its sheath, holding it blade down in her grip, in case she was expecting trouble.

What she found was even more confusing.

The lights were on, and there stood Len, pants on but no shirt, casually going through whatever Sally had left behind, not even looking over his shoulder to see her coming into the place. "Heya Rin," he said to her. "Saw you cleaning your boots by the stairs, so I'm assuming that's you, and not the goons who were here earlier."

"Weren't *you* the one who taught *me* never to assume anything?" she said, tucking her knife away once more. "Didn't you say it would get me killed?"

He turned to look over his shoulder with a sly smile, shrugging a little. "I also told you that no rule applied to *everything*, so at some point you have to learn to trust your judgment." He stopped his search and walked over to give her a hug. "How long you been here, Rummy, and how much did you retain?"

"About a month and not nearly enough," she sighed, patting him on the back before they broke the hug. "I'd say I've got maybe 50-60% of what should be there rattling around upstairs. Like I remember that when you call me Rummy, I usually call you Whiskey in return, but I can't remember where that's from."

"Our drinking habits," he said. "I think I got lucky. Feels like I've got most of it up there still, although there are big chunks missing. Call it 80%?"

"Weird question to ask, top, but you have any idea what you're missing?"

He bounced his eyebrows a moment. "It's like there are weird spots just blanked out when I try and remember things. Like I can remember my favorite color is orange, but not what my favorite food is. And what's the tactical use of taking something like that from me, right?"

"It's an inaccurate process, top," she told him. "Some people on the island claim to have almost all of it still up there, but there's also some others who are barely holding it together, considering how much they lost."

"We shouldn't stay here too long," he said. "Sally's likely to come back any minute now."

Rin frowned, looking away from him for a moment. "No, she's not, boss."

He stopped mid search, drawing in a deep breath before letting out, sounding disappointed, with himself or Sally, Rin couldn't quite be certain. "Dead, I'm guessing?"

"Yeah, someone hung her from one of the lampposts a few hours back. Carved an F into her chest. Me and Tex buried her over in the graveyard."

He shook his head. "I should've known when she slipped out after she thought I was asleep that

it wouldn't end well. She was trying to press me for information, about myself, who I am, where I came from, and I could've, well, I guess I could've given her a little bit more than I did, but how much would she have needed to buy her way out of whatever hole she was in?"

"C'mon, Len, you know better than to go down that rabbit hole," she told him. "People make their own decisions and walk their own paths, so don't go around bearing crosses that haven't got your name on them."

"Who gave you such shitty advice?" he laughed darkly.

"I do believe it was you, top."

"Then I'd better learn to keep my mouth shut more often."

"You know you don't believe that, boss."

"Yeah, I know I don't," he said, grabbing his shirt to pull it on. "But maybe I should. How's your recon going?"

"How do you know I've been doing any?"

"Because it's what *I* would've done if I had gotten here first?"

"Fair," she smiled. "Haven't seen the whole island because it's bigger than we anticipated it would be. I think they must have moles in the major satellite companies, doing everything they can to keep it off the maps, because while I've got a rough idea of where we are, it might as well be the Moon for as far off normal shipping lanes and flight paths as we are."

"So where's it put us?"

"Best guess? If you imagine us as a third point on a triangle with Bora Bora forming one corner and Easter Island forming the second, we're somewhere deep in the South Pacific, way the fuck away from everyone and everything."

"How big are we in comparison?"

"Maybe a third to half the size of Easter Island, so 15-30 square miles, all said and done? Probably closer to 15, but making an actual map of this place is a goddamn nightmare."

He tilted his head. "Why's that?"

"Compasses don't work, there's loads of jungle wildlife, some of which doesn't make *any* goddamn sense..."

He raised a hand to stop her. "Okay, first, we should get out of here, but let's go through both of those points one at a time while we walk." They both took a quick sweep of the place, being sure that nothing useful or informational was being left behind, then headed out of the apartment, moving down the stairs. "What do you mean 'compasses don't work'?"

"There's some sort of local electromagnetic field that screws up compasses, so no matter where you are on the island, a compass thinks 'north' is the mountain near the center of the island," she said as they started walking away from the building. "Hell, it might actually *be* the center of the island, but I can't be entirely certain. Four or five people have made their own maps, and nobody's map quite lines up with anyone else's."

"That's good information to have, though," he said. "Weird magnetic center for the island. Now, tell me about the wildlife."

"So there's the kinds of things you would expect – wild boars, monkeys, birds, all that sort of thing, although there's also some stuff that doesn't make any sense at all. We've seen a Bengal tiger at least a couple of times, and if stories are to be believed, there's a hippopotamus that lives in the raised mini lake along the far side of the mountain."

"A hippo?" Len said, stopping in his walk. "Sounds like a ghost story to me."

"I've been by the lake, and while I didn't see anything, I also didn't want to stick around too long, because I saw the tiger drinking on the other side of the lake when I was there," she said. "And with no guns, hunting a tiger isn't exactly an easy task. A couple of people have been trying to make bows and arrows to hunt it down, but that's gone about as well as expected."

"Any luck finding weapons left behind?"

"If there were any, I'm certain they've been picked clean and either used or disposed of," she told him as they started to walk again. "Tex's story mostly holds, and despite how he sort of organizes a lot of the daily chores around here, I'm mostly certain he's not Management or an Employee, but an actual Guest just trying to make the most of his situation."

"You recognize any of our fellow inhabitants? More importantly, anyone recognize you?"

Rin shook her head. "Nobody's recognized me, although there's certainly someone who *should* that *isn't*. Caulfield's here."

That made Len stop walking again. "How certain are you that he doesn't recognize you?"

"He *hit* on me."

He continued walking. "Yeah, I'd say *that's* a pretty good sign that he doesn't know who you are. And you've had a whole month here with him and haven't done anything? I can't tell if I'm impressed by your restraint or disappointed in your lack of initiative."

"I didn't want to go around dropping bodies left and right until more of us were here," she sighed. "And I *really* didn't want to be the first one here."

"Well, you were, so there's no point in dwelling on what you wanted," he said as they reached his building. "You've got a month's worth of information I'm going to need to glean from you as quickly as I can, so maybe we'll need to keep meeting up nights for a bit."

"We could try and play the couple card," she said to him. "If I was in your bed, I could brief you all night long." She'd never had any interest in Len beyond professional, and Len had made it abundantly clear that none of the team should shit where they eat, so Rin had kept her gaze off both Mick and Harry, not that either of them had shown much interest in her either.

"And then neither of us is out gathering data, and using our best assets."

"You almost sound like you're whoring me out," she laughed.

"*Us*," he corrected. "I sound like I'm whoring *us* out. Because I am. You know as well as I do that we use our sexuality like any other weapon."

"Hopefully I don't turn out to be the black widow that you are," she teased. "First person you fuck on the island ends up dead a few hours later. Maybe that's the reason you don't want me in your bed. Worried I'll end up like Sally."

"Sally seemed desperate, Rin," he told her. "You don't seem that way to me."

"I'm not, sir," she said, coming to a stop in front of one of the residence buildings. "Just not thrilled at how hard it is to tell the friendlies from the enemies around here."

"Around here? That's always been our line of work, Rin. We never know who's with us or against us up until we have to put a bullet in their skull."

"No guns here, boss," she grumbled. "And you have no idea how much I want one. Anyway, this is me. Second story, unit 2. Meet up again tomorrow around the time Tex's closes?"

"Sounds good," he said, offering her a hand, which she shook. "It's good to know you're okay, Rin. And I'm glad to have you here."

"Glad to have you here as well, sir," she told him as she released the hand.

### Len

He felt a little bit better knowing that he had someone else from Scarab on the island already, although the vague aura of hauntedness around Rin had counteracted most of that ease he'd gained. In the month she'd been on the island, she'd obviously seen more than her fair share of unusual things, and the fact that she was putting a body in the ground came far easier to her than it had used to.

While he didn't remember everything about his and Rin's past, most of the key details were in there, and he remembered that Rin had been the third member of his four-person team, having added her after Mick but before Harry. He'd recruited her in Lebanon, over a wonderful order of migas. She'd been bitter with her previous employer and the idea of carving out on her own appealed to her a great deal. Their paths had crossed a couple of times before, but he made sure she had all the facts before she



agreed to essentially go rogue. That had been six years ago, give or take.

It was nearly dawn, and he felt like he needed to get back to sleep. He'd gotten an hour or two after Sally had slipped out of bed to go meet her handlers before the goons had come up to try and quietly search the apartment while they assumed he was sleeping. It had been tempting to engage them in combat, subdue them and see who they were, but he felt like he'd gained a handful of details about them that would let him identify them later, should he see them again.

He was certain that he would.

When he headed back into his apartment, he gave it another cursory sweep, mostly just checking for intruders because with unlocked doors, anything that was valuable had better be on his personage at all times. Not that he had anything of value on him.

Len moved over to the balcony, looking out as he could see that sky was shifting slowly from black towards blue, dawn probably only an hour or so away, which meant he needed to get his rest. He stripped off his clothes, tossing them into the hamper then he crawled into bed, and drifted off to sleep.

When he awoke several hours later, nearly midday or so, he wasn't alone in his bed.

### **Part Three**

#### Len

Waking up with a surprise guest wasn't something he'd ever really get used to, although he supposed in this particular case, there was more than ample reason why she'd been able to sneak past his usual self-defense techniques while he was sleeping. She'd had a decent amount of practice at it. Hell, he'd sort of taught her how to do it.

He hadn't even opened his eyes yet, but he recognized that gentle touch along his belly, fingers grazing before slowly curling around the length of his cock, starting to stroke it tenderly, a soft giggle rippling through the air right alongside his ear.

"No matter how much you study sounds of yourself sleeping in an attempt to mimic it, John, I'm always going to be able to tell the difference," that familiar voice said to him, even going so far as to call him by his real first name, although she still didn't know his surname. (Which, to be fair, basically no one did. A secret that multiple knew wasn't really a secret.) And he knew her real first name as well. Hell, she was part of the reason he'd even decided to do this madcap adventure, as he suspected she might have been on the island after she'd gone missing.

"I didn't know you were *you* for sure until I heard your voice," Len said with a sly smile. "But I'm very glad you're you, Mira." He opened his eyes and saw her face off to the side of him, her naked body curled up against his, a little bit older, certainly, no worse for the wear.

"No 'how you've been, Mira?' or 'what happened to you, Mira?' or 'why the fuck did you up and disappear on me without any warning, Mira?' None of that?"

Len grinned, rolling his eyes. "I'm guessing you got taken, much like I did, and brought here. In fact, I'm willing to bet that you were taken when you ran out to get coffee that last morning we were together. Because I know that you were. I saw it on cameras, but too late to be able to do anything about it. That's how I knew you were abducted."

She nodded. "I was. I can remember that much, even if a lot of the memories are sort of jumbled together. How long ago was that?"

"Well, I don't know for certain how long it was between my abduction and my arrival here, but best guess? About six months or so."

"Yeah, that tracks with about how long I've been here, give or take a week or two," she sighed, not lifting her hand off his cock, still leisurely stroking it. "I'm sorry I left you that morning, but you know me and my need for caffeine in the morning."

It was good to see her again. While he didn't know her real last name, he knew her real first name – Mira – and that was enough for two spies to forge a relationship of sorts. Mira was either

working for, or had worked for, the Mossad, the Israeli Special Forces and Intelligence Agency, although her loyalty to her country hadn't always been reliable. She'd told him that she was loyal to a nation, not to a government, because governments habitually let people down when they need them the most, and nations made a point never to promise anyone anything.

From the moment they'd first met, he'd had to work hard to keep his emotions in check. They'd both been in the middle of a firefight in Iran, allies by opportunity and necessity but not planning, each of them trying to get out of the same building with entirely different (but not conflicting) objectives. Still, they'd recognized each other as a friendly, and instead of shooting each other, they'd teamed up to get not only out of the building, but out of the block and out of the city, the adrenaline rushing the entire time. It was a meet-cute unlike any other.

Mira was in her mid thirties, with skin a light shade of olive tan, her brown hair having blistered into blonde from overexposure to the sun. She was a tiny slip of a woman, barely an inch over five foot, slender with small breasts and a pert ass, never as curvy as she would've liked to be, but she also just couldn't bring herself to eat more than her fair share. She'd bitched at Len about how small her tits were a number of times and he'd just done his best to constantly reassure her that she was attractive to him, and that she just needed to be satisfied with who she was. She was from Jerusalem, or at least she'd told him that she was, if that was to be believed. But she was definitely Israeli, and worked for the Mossad, although over the time of their relationship, she'd been considering breaking away and being independent, like she thought Len was. He'd actually been considering bringing her to meet the team on the morning she'd up and disappeared.

They'd been what could only be described as 'dating' for about five months when she'd simply vanished one morning. Len, as paranoid as he was, had immediately considered the option that he'd been played, that Mira had been a honey trap to lure him in and get him to betray the confidence of his friends. But he was *him* and caution wasn't just a watchword, it was a way of life. The more he reviewed all their exchanges in his head, however, the less and less likely that she'd been playing him had seemed. While she'd been interested in him, she'd also been steeped in tradecraft as much as he had, and so they'd both known better than to ask personal or intimate questions, or about jobs that either of them had been involved in. He'd definitely been on high guard the first time they'd hooked up, but as the months had passed, it had been nice to be able to talk to someone about the challenges of their particular line of work without getting into the specifics. She was the same way, treating him with a sort of open candor that had surprised him, but also impressed him with how good she was at obfuscating details, making sure he wouldn't know any operational details about anything she was talking about. They could relate in the generals without compromising anything for specifics.

They had shared a wonderful date night – a late dinner in Rome before walking the streets until the moon was high in the sky, then some of the most intense sex he'd ever had. He'd even fallen asleep without much effort, and then in the morning, she'd just been gone. He'd suspected she'd headed off for a cup of cappuccino, one of her usual vices, and he wondered initially if she'd just gotten distracted. It wasn't typical of her, but for a spy, Mira could sometimes be drawn in by a particularly shiny object or a ridiculously cute pair of shoes. It was so wonderfully *normal* of her that he couldn't fault her for it.

But the afternoon came and went and she had not returned. And, more importantly, she had left several of her things behind, things she would not have left if she'd intended to be gone for long. And when night fell again, *then* he'd started to get worried.

It had taken him canvassing much of the next day, but eventually he found security camera footage of Mira having a bag thrown over her head and a tazer jammed into her ribs, before her unconscious body was loaded into the side of a van, which drove off into the streets of Rome. It all happened within a matter of seconds, so fast that none of the people on the streets even took notice of it, as the van was driving off before it registered in their brains that something odd might have just transpired. Shock and awe, baby; shock and awe. Whoever the abduction team was, they were *good*.

And, of course, Len suspected that the Mossad's first thought would be that he was responsible

for her disappearance, so he'd forwarded the footage on to a contact he still had there, informing them that she had been taken but he didn't know by who. He'd also gathered up all the things she'd left in their hotel room – things he knew were important and things he knew weren't and some things that he thought could go either way – and then had them sent to the Israeli embassy.

He knew they'd have a lot of questions he couldn't answer, so he'd made sure to disappear as quickly as he could. His friend in the Mossad had understood, and had thanked him for returning all of her working gear along with the video of her abduction. The return of her things – which he was certain also included some operational information concealed and encrypted somewhere – seemed buy him a little bit of goodwill. It *sounded* like they didn't hold him accountable, but if they had, they wouldn't have wanted him to know that, and they would've sounded like they believed him anyway. They were going to look into it, they assured him, not that *he* fully believed *them*. That was par for the course, though.

No spy truly completely bought into anything another spy ever told them.

The trail on where she'd been taken had gone cold almost immediately, but as he started to investigate, he'd discovered that her abduction hadn't been an isolated incident. In fact, someone was starting to abduct the world's espionage agents, and without respect for country or cause. There were agents strangely missing from all of the world's major spy agencies, usually kidnapped in public and then made to disappear, and that was the element that confused everyone the most.

At first, the thought was that they were being killed and the bodies were being disposed of somewhere nobody could find them, Al Capone style. But somebody had caught footage of one of the missing spies – a Soviet FSB agent named Gosha – being loaded onto a plane and flown out of Turkey for destinations unknown, and while he was drugged and unconscious, he was very much alive. The footage had shown him hooked up to a couple of IVs, one in each arm, with a gag in his mouth and a blindfold over his eyes. But Gosha had a very distinct tattoo done in an H.R. Geiger style on his shoulder that was visible in the footage, and there was no mistaking that it was him. It had been picked up in the background of some news footage being shot for completely unrelated reasons at the airport in Turkey, and some brand new analysis software had flagged it before any human eyes had even noticed it.

With the discovery of Gosha's abduction, suddenly everyone was taking The Great Spynapping much more seriously because now they knew for a fact it wasn't just spies killing spies and business as usual across the industry.

It had become the great riddle of the spy agencies over the last year, although there were indications that it had been going on far longer than that, and simply nobody had considered them as 'missing' and instead written them off as 'killed in action.'

So Len and the rest of Scarab had made the decision that they would get abducted and they would figure out what the hell was going on, even before someone had contracted them to locate one of the missing spies specifically. It hadn't been a great plan. Hell, it hadn't even been *much* of a plan, but they'd done some initial prepwork and thought some things out. He'd even leveled with the team about Mira, his feelings for her and her abduction. That had been met with, understandably, a certain level of distrust and suspicion, but the team was nothing if not thorough, and they'd done as much of their homework as they could beforehand, not just about Mira, but about all the various spies that had been reported missing or killed for the last few years, a tricky task for intel gathering in the best of circumstances, something they certainly were not in now, what with Putin threatening to go rampaging all over Eastern Europe, 'reclaiming' lost Russian lands that had never really belonged to them in the first place.

All of it had finally come to a head when Len himself had been abducted, although he'd been the second member of the team to do so, with Rin having been taken slightly before he was. They'd happened so quickly after one another that they'd only just realized Rin had been taken a day or so before they got Len himself. It had led him, them, all to here.

Now, with Mira in bed next to him, he hoped he could finally start to get some answers. He hoped she would remember more about the abduction than he did, because for him, that entire area was complete and total blank. “What the hell happened, Mira?”

She frowned a little bit. “I wish I could tell you. You know everybody on the island has got some screwy wiring, so I can't even tell you how much I've got floating around in my head that's right, or things that have been put in there. There's giant gaps, holes big enough to fly a 747 through. I remember you, I remember us, I remember thinking about leaving the Mossad, but I can't remember where I grew up. I can't remember what my parents look like. I can't remember who I lost my virginity to, or where I went to school, or even if I have brothers or sisters.” She drew in a sharp breath, steeling herself up a bit. “It's like an entire part of me has been taken away from me, and put behind some kind of wall. And there are some things rolling around in there that feel like they happened to someone else, not to me. I know it doesn't make but that's how it feels, like it's not my memory and that I'm seeing something that happened to someone else somewhere else. Memories where people are speaking Russian, French, Spanish... memories where I'm a man. They're only stray fragments, but it hurts to try and think about them for too long. It's like trying to catch a soap bubble – if I get too close, it'll pop and I'll have lost it.”

He let out a soft breath. “Do you remember what we were talking about the night before you disappeared?”

“How I was thinking about joining up with whatever madness you were involved in?” she said with a kind glance. “That what you and I share was more important than any country to me, and that I was willing to go rogue with you? Of course I still remember that. We spent hours going around and around about whether or not we'd ever be able to trust each other, and what it would take for us to get over the spy life and just be... ourselves. But I remember you starting to come around to the idea of me joining your little merry band of rebels after I pointed out that if you could leave *your* country's employ, why couldn't I leave mine as well? What's strange is that I can't remember *where* we were when we were having that conversation.”

“Rome,” he told her, and she suddenly winced, as if a spike of migraine headache had flashed across her frontal lobe, her hands clutched to her temples in sharp agony, although it seemed like the moment passed as quickly as it had arrived, a sudden bolt of anguish before retreating back into the darkness of her mind. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she wheezed, obviously not but trying to convince herself that she was. “It's... it's just like that was a piece of information I didn't have, and shoving it back into my brain was like screwing a lightbulb into a turned on socket. Smarted a bit, but the pain's fading now. I can remember a bit more about that day – where we were, the hotel we stayed at, the way the bellhop kept checking out my ass in that cute little skirt I had on...”

“Mira, focus. You know anything about the people who took us? Who they work for? What side they're on?”

“Jesus, John, I barely got a look at any of them,” she said, shaking her head. “I've spent most of my adult life checking for blindspots and they hit me from one I never saw coming. We should be less concerned with them and more concerned with surviving *this* place, because it's fucking insane.” She was slowly rubbing one of her thighs along his, threatening to slip up atop him at any moment. “I do feel a lot better knowing you're here.”

“What's so insane about this place?” Len asked. “Sure it's a little odd with everyone just volunteering to do work, but to me it feels like a sort of logical extension of a bunch of people doing what they need to to survive.”

“Survive,” she said. “Yes, that's my point, John. Why do they give a shit about any of us *surviving*, when we're clearly prisoners? Why not just kill us? Are they trying to learn something from us, and if so, why fuck with our memories? They may well have deleted from our skulls the very thing they wanted to get out of us!”

"I don't think they *know* what they've taken out of us and what they haven't, Mira, so they're still trying to figure out how this process of theirs works and what it is and isn't capable of," he told her. "But I know that at least some of the people responsible for our abductions are here on the island. They dispatched someone last night to try and glean any information she could from me, and when she failed to get as much as they wanted, they had her killed."

"What was her name?"

"She said her name was Sally."

Mira drew in a sharp breath, then nodded. "I guess that makes sense. Sally's always been extremely eager to please, to ingratiate herself into any group of people, and because she was always so forward about trying to get into the cliques, nobody trusted her, and she really couldn't learn anything. Maybe you batch of newcomers yesterday were her last chance. I probably should've been paying more attention to her – where she went, who she talked to, that sort of thing – but I've been trying to keep a low profile and just not get noticed anywhere I went for fear of being recognized." She laughed, a bitter and angry note that Len had heard before, but only when she was truly frustrated to the point of being unable to hide it. "You have no idea how much the idea of no locks on any doors will weigh on you until you've spent a few months dealing with it, knowing there really isn't any place that's completely safe. Besides, there's something fundamentally *wrong* about this place."

Len paused and looked at her odd for a moment. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"You haven't noticed it yet, but the layout... it *moves* from time to time..." It didn't sound like Mira for a moment, the fear and uncertainty, as if she wasn't comfortable bringing it up with him, but that she had to tell someone, and if not him, then who?

"You must just be forgetting things."

"I'm *not* forgetting things, John," she said to him, her hand clinging to his shoulder, looking deep into his eyes. "I've gotten up some mornings and the building I was in was in a different part of the *island*. The place I was staying in had *moved*, okay? I know it sounds fucking mental, but I'm *telling* you that the room I was in had been on the edge of the village when I went to bed and I woke up it was practically next to the fucking *bar*. All my clothes, everything was exactly where I'd left it when I went to bed except for the actual fucking *room* we were in. I know how it sounds, but you need to believe me when I tell you this – the place is definitely off."

"Okay, Mira, okay... I believe you, alright?" he said, because the haunted look in her eyes convinced him that whatever had actually happened to her, she believed that the room she'd been in had truly moved, and she was one of the smartest people he'd ever met, so as unlikely as he found the idea of teleporting rooms and relocating sections, he had to give it genuine consideration. "Do you know how?"

"No, I don't fucking know *how*, John," she said, letting out a slow breath. "Don't you think I've been looking into it? It doesn't make any goddamn sense, it doesn't happen with any sense or reason, but it *does* happen, and a few other people here on the island have seen it too."

"I'll keep an eye out for it Mira, but there's a lot to keep track of here on the island."

"You don't know the half of it," she grumbled. "But you will. Sooner or later, you will."

After that, they had a proper reunion. She climbed atop of him and pushed him deep into the bed as she shoved her cunt down onto his cock slowly and methodically, reveling in the feeling of their bodies pressed up against one another again for the first time in a long time. They fell together like familiar halves of the same whole, his shaft fitting perfectly into her slot, like they were made for one another. In sharp contrast to how his time with Sally had been, Mira paid close attention to his breathing, measuring it with her lips ever so slightly in between kisses, setting a tempo that was like a dance, ebbing and flowing, rising and falling, rushing then relaxing, each motion completely unrehearsed and yet totally natural and authentic.

They even came together.

Together, they weren't spies – just a couple of old lovers reunited after a long absence.

It had been just like the first time.

While he felt confident she was who she said she was, and that she had gotten there how she'd said she'd gotten there, that little voice in the back of his mind reminded him once more that there were only two people he could trust with complete certainty in this world. The first was himself; the second wasn't her.

A few hours later, they'd gotten up and taken a shower together, only to have another go at each other beneath the falling water. Making up for lost time.

Somewhere along the way, Len decided he was going to have to start compartmentalizing people on the island. Rin and the rest of the Scarab would be the people he would trust with his life. He wouldn't quite be ready to put Mira in that category yet, but she was close. She would be in the category of 'very strong allies' he felt he could count on. Then there were the neutrals, people like Tex, who seemed like they weren't likely to be part of Management or even Staff. Then there would be people who might be Staff or Management. There'd been a couple of those on the plane with him on the way in. Then there were the wildcards, and fuck all if it didn't seem like there were a shitload of those he'd have to contend with.

This had been the central problem they'd spent the most time preparing for, and even after a month or so of planning, they'd still be lacking for any good ideas, although they did have a shitload of bad ones, and Len supposed that was better than nothing.

He suspected that the rest of the team still wasn't happy about it, but figured they would sort things out as best as they could until either they found the island or the island found them.

For now, he needed to start exploring, and now he at least had someone with a bit of time spent with boots on the ground, so he and Mira headed out, with Len ready for just about anything.

### Harry

If there was one element of Len's plan that Harry especially hated, it was *all of it*.

Three months ago when they'd taken the contract to find and understand where all these missing spies were going, all of their research had hit nothing but dead ends, and in a particularly frightening way. The foursome that made up Scarab liked to think of themselves as incredibly good at their job, and their inability to turn up almost any leads had all of them a little bit put off. The abduction of Gosha had been the biggest break they'd had since they'd started, and it turned into dead ends much faster than anyone had expected.

The plane Gosha had been taken on had been shot down over the ocean, and the only other person who'd been visible in the footage captured accidentally – a former member of the Mexican High Command GAFE named Nieto – had turned up dead the day after the footage had hit the intelligence community.

No paper trail, nobody who could describe anybody, nothing caught on any cameras. Everything felt like it was done through cutouts, and the moment they thought they had a description of someone who might have had something to do with one of the abductions, that person would be a dead body before anyone could find them.

Harry was the most recent addition to Scarab, having only been with the team for a couple of years, unlike Mick, who'd been with Len since the unit was founded several years ago. As such, he still felt like there was a bit of hazing going on now and again. They'd liked to play practical jokes on him every now and then. But even with all of that, he still felt like very much a part of a family, even if he was habitually the 'f'ing new guy.'

With Rin and Len both having been abducted, it meant either he or Mick were next, and so the two of them had banded together, making it look as much as they could that they didn't want to get taken, and that they were hot on the trail of whoever had taken them.

That meant one of them stayed awake while the other one was sleeping, and that they were always looking out for each other. It meant being on guard at all times, ever alert, never once wavering

in the high alert sort of—

—OW.—

Harry reached up to try and pull the dart from his neck, but he was unconscious before his fingers even touched the feathers of it.

Right before he blacked out, he decided that he wasn't going to let Mick give him any shit over this when he saw him next.

*If* he saw him next.

## **Part Four**

### *Harry*

When he opened his eyes, he was in what could only be described as a 'clean room,' as the overriding theme of the entire place was white. White walls, white benches (including one that he was strapped to), white doors and an abundance of white lights all around the room to infect his view with diffused light, as if everything was seeped in a heavy white glow.

He wasn't the only one in the room, however, as he noticed two other people strapped to benches. All three of them were dressed in white hospital gowns, hanging down to the knees. They were all shackled at the wrists and ankles, as well as straps around their waists, shoulders, knees and necks, making sure they had near no mobility, although they could turn their heads. Each of them was gagged, though, so none of them could talk to one another. They were on tilted slabs, mostly elevated, with their feet resting against a metal slat across the bottom, the two women at 45 degree angles off each side.

The woman to the left of him looked like she was either Latina or Mediterranean, with coal black hair down to her shoulders and well-tanned skin, her light green eyes whipping around the room, trying to take in her surroundings. She looked incredibly familiar to Harry, but where he felt like the look of her should connect to a memory, his brain kept returning back 'File Not Found,' something that made his head ache just a little bit, the absence of memory made that much more conspicuous by knowing something *should* be there. She was certainly attractive enough that she would've made an impression, short and slender, but still more than a little busty, as he could tell from how the gown clung more tightly around the chest area.

The woman to the right of him also seemed frustratingly familiar, although again he could not connect the person he saw before him with a memory rattling around inside of his brain, another 404 error being kicked back when he tried to follow the image to something more substantial in his mental library. She was Asian, about the same height as the woman to his left, so several inches shorter than him, as Harry was a decently tall guy, a little bit over 6' tall. Her facial features looked as though they leaned towards Thai or Korean, but he was mostly just taking guesses there, as he couldn't find any real details inside of his mind to connect to the woman's look other than, well, 'lush.' Both of them were more than a bit fit, and that felt important, but he had nothing to connect it to. Her black hair was kept long, swept back behind her ears, hanging down her back some length he couldn't tell based on the positions of her body in relation to his.

There was no one else in the room with them, but they were all sort of vaguely facing the same direction, the one part of the room that wasn't white, instead a matte black, a giant LCD television screen that was currently off. After a few minutes, once all three of them were clearly awake, the screen flickered to life.

Whatever camera they were using to shoot the image, it was clearly being put through a number of filters, or maybe shot through gauze, or maybe even both, as the whole image itself was slightly fuzzy and distorted, not that Harry imagined it would make much of a difference, as what he was looking at only made him even more confused.

The image was that of a single figure situated behind a wooden desk, something old and

antique, but also rather sturdy looking, like it had seen a few hundred years without blinking. The figure was wearing a red and black yoroi, or samurai armor, which concealed any real details about the person underneath it in terms of physicality or gender. The face was wearing a big rubbery Richard Nixon mask, the kind with the overly large nose sticking out. Instead of eyes, however, there were bright red LED lights shining around the eyeholes, obscuring any level of detail there. On top of the head was a giant, wide brimmed black fedora that extended out almost to the edge of the shoulderpads of the yoroi, with a single brown band around the base of it.

Behind the figure was what looked like an endless number of green vines covered in thorns woven together as some sort of backdrop, sprouts with leaves jutting off from some of them, each of them trembling a little bit, as if a strong wind was being blown across the set. It also almost looked like the vines themselves were shifting up and down a bit, although Harry wondered if that was just his eyes playing tricks on him.

On top of the desk in front of the figure was an old golden set of scales, the kind he'd only ever really seen in statues of Justice, although the scales themselves seemed balanced, with nothing on either of them. To the left of the scales was a ball composed of what looked like clockwork or some other sort of gear based machinery. To the right of them was a cage with a large rodent-like creature, although it was hard to see, as much of the cage was hooded. Maybe it was a wolverine or a mongoose. Harry didn't know, and frankly, didn't know if it mattered.

The whole image was so utterly baffling that he wasn't sure what details, if any, were even relevant for him to try and commit to memory, so he was doing what he could to keep it all impressed in his brain, as a voice on the other end began to speak, the sound of the voice heavily distorted and garbled through what had to be a number of vocal filters, changing the sound of it to something inhuman and alien.

“Good morning, captives,” the voice said to them. “We are certain you are wondering where all of your memories have gone. You do not have need of them at this time, and should they become of actual importance, you may find them returning to you naturally. Until then, you should consider them to be unimportant and give them no further attention.”

Harry wanted to argue, but knew struggling against the gag would serve no real purpose, and instead chose to keep quiet.

“Very soon, you are being sent to The Retreat, where you will spend an indeterminate amount of time. In some ways, the amount of time you spend there will be up to you, male figure. We have decided upon an experiment with the three of you and your introduction to The Retreat.”

As much as Harry was listening to the voice, he was also trying to focus on the image, hoping to see whether or not the figure was making any movements at all, but the constant sway and slithering of the vines in the background, as well as the poor level of video quality, made it very difficult to tell.

“From your arrival, you will have one week to make a decision. At the end of the week, one of these two women will be killed, and you will decide which one. If you do not survive the week, *both* of these women shall die, so it is in their interests not to let you be harmed, and, in fact, to find a way to co-exist with you comfortably, as whichever of the two women survives will be linked to you for the entirety of your time on the island, her health linked to yours, and vice versa. If either of the two women die before the week has elapsed, all three of you shall die, so do not consider that a loophole, ladies, that you can exploit.”

Harry was already starting to do calculations in his head, considering what he knew about each of them, and what was the best possible way to make a cold and level-headed assessment but he just knew things were going to get a lot more complicated once they were on the island. He glanced between the two women expecting to see panic and/or desperation in their eyes, but instead he saw only solid resolve.

“We've also got some modifications made to you three, but you'll see those in time, we are certain. Now it is time for you all to sleep, but when you awaken, remember this – you are being



watched, and you are being judged.” A heavy white fog started to fall into the room, a knockout gas, Harry was certain, and while he could've held his breath, he knew they would wait until enough time had passed that they were all unconscious before entering the room. The last thing he heard before he passed out was the voice saying, loud and booming, “No one escapes Oversight.”

When he awoke next, his ears were popping and the sky was falling all around him, except sort of in reverse. Within a few seconds, he realized he was strapped in to a large inflatable raft that was parachuting towards the ocean, along with the two women he'd seen in the room earlier. Time had clearly passed, although he had no idea how much. His internal clock was generally pretty good, and he felt like he'd been out somewhere between twelve and sixteen hours, at least some of that which must have been spent in an airplane, probably that giant fucker he could see zipping away off in one direction, which looked like it had also thrown a handful of crates out after them, all of which were also parachuting down towards the ocean below.

There was an island of what looked like a decent size off to one side of them, and other than that, it was just blue seas as far as the eye could see in any direction, even from their decent height. Based on the temperature, he was guessing they were somewhere in the Pacific and in the southern hemisphere, but that was a giant amount of blue space they could be anywhere within, the sun almost ready to set on the horizon.

Both of the women had woken up and were taking in their surroundings, but really there wasn't much to do until a minute or two passed and the craft landed on the water. “So who're you then?” the Asian woman asked him. Her voice sounded like it might have been from Hong Kong, which would have put her with the Ministry of State Security, although it was still possible she could have been with the National Intelligence Agency (Thailand) or the National Intelligence Service (South Korea). Harry didn't have anywhere near enough experience in the Southeast Asian Theatre to be able to spot that right away. “Why're you so important?”

“I'm not,” Harry shot back. “I'm just a cut-out, a go-between for two different groups with real power, so I know bugger all about what game they're playing.”

“Bullshit,” the Latina said, and he could tell that her accent was actually Portuguese, which meant she was likely from the Defense and Strategic Informations Service (SIED), which was like Portugal's MI-6. As former MI-6, he'd had a couple of encounters with SIED during his time in the service, and found them to be generally capable and reliably dangerous. But whether or not that included any time with this particular woman, he just didn't know. Once again with that empty space, and no frame of reference as to how big that particular chunk of empty space was. “You gotta know something, limey.”

“Anything I think I might've known got burned out by whatever they put us through, ladies, so your guess is literally better than my own might be,” Harry shot back, just before the life raft hit the water.

There was a zippy little speedboat that came out to gather up the packages and the life raft Harry and the two women were in, hauling them back towards an island that Harry had been dreading arriving at ever since they'd begun discussing the plan.

The women were busy focusing their attention on him as the speedboat pulled them towards the island, but Harry was doing everything he could to study the island itself. He'd always had a good grasp of spatial location, so he was trying to build a overall structure of the island that he could use to fill in later, but as the speedboat was dragging them towards the island, Harry felt like any time he focused on any single portion of the island for too long, his vision started to blur a little and his head started to hurt, so he decided not to spend too long staring at any one thing, trying to build a general picture of the size and shape of it.

Once they got to the island itself, a swarm of people immediately began transferring all the crates from the water to a series of golf cart like trucks. Harry found the whole story their host, a genial enough fellow named 'Tex,' to be plausible enough, but resolved to take a longer look at it sooner rather

than later.

Things got weird fast, though, when Harry decided to ask Tex about Oversight, just after Tex had finished explaining about housing and accommodations to them. “So tell me what you know about Oversight, Tex,” Harry said to him, as Tex was driving them over towards one of the blocks of apartments.

“Who's Oversight?” Tex said, and for the life of him, Harry was pretty sure he was being genuine.

“That's what the people who sent us all here called themselves in a message they sent me before they dropped us out of an airplane,” Harry said as Tex slowly brought the golf cart around the corner and then moved to put it in a parking space.

Tex nodded, scratching his chin. “That's the first time we've heard them refer to themselves as *anything* so I guess it's as good a name as any. We were just callin'em Management. What was the message they gave you?”

“Some bullshit about having to decide which of these two women lives and dies,” Harry sighed, leaning back in his chair.

“Who the fuck are *you* to decide?” the Latina said to him from the back seat.

“That's just it, ladies. I keep telling you, I'm nobody.”

“Nobody here's nobody,” Tex said with a smirk. “But if you don't remember who you are, there's no shame in that. Lots of us here don't remember who we are or even which teams we used to play for. I'm dang certain that Tex ain't my real name, but when I woke up, I was talking with a drawl, and so everyone kept calling me Tex, and it stuck, 'cause any time anybody asked me my name before that, I had fuck all to tell them.”

“Hell of a problem to have.”

“Didn't catch any of your names,” Tex said. “So I better ask.”

“Harry.”

“Stella,” the Asian woman said, offering no information past that.

“Calisto,” the Latina woman said.

“Well, normally I'd offer you a tour of the units, tell you about all of the features available, including our nifty pneumatic tubes system, but to be honest, you folks showed up far later than our arrivals normally do, and I'm just too damn tired to want to get into it tonight, so you can swing by my bar with any questions, or just ask your neighbors anything you need to know. The only thing I'm going to tell you now so it's not a shock is that there aren't any locks on any doors here on the island, so consider everything that isn't on your personage as 'borrowable,” he said with a dry chuckle. “Despite the fact that you've probably been sleeping for ten to twelve hours, you're also probably tired as fuck, so go claim a room and we'll see you folks around tomorrow.” Tex gestured with a wave of his hand before suddenly raising a fingertip. “How long did Oversight give you to decide which one of the two women lives and which one dies?”

“They said a week,” Harry replied. “And it had all sorts of weird rules about it, but they can't really just kill somebody on the island, can they?”

“They can, have and do all the time, my boy, so I'd start putting some serious thought into which of these two women's lives you want to make significantly longer than the other.”

“Bloody hell,” Harry grumbled to himself as he grabbed the box with his name on it off the back of the cart, just as Calisto and Stella had done moments earlier, the two women waiting for him at the stairs, looking at him expectantly. “What?”

“Where are we going, limey?” Calisto said to him.

“What makes you think *we* are going *anywhere* together?”

“There aren't any locks on the doors, and until one of the two of us is dead,” Stella said, “we're both going to be your fucking shadows, so you'd better wrap your head around that idea.”

“Great,” Harry said. “Doesn't this just sound like a laugh and a half?”

He walked up the stairs with the women both keeping just a few steps behind him, as he made his way up along the side of the building to the third floor, making his way down to the fourth unit on the floor, knocking on the door before pushing it open. "Anybody in here?"

Harry set foot into the room, finding it empty. The décor was certainly about forty years or so late, with wood paneling on the walls of the living room and a yellowish-green hue to all the cushions on the couches.

"1972 called," he muttered to himself. "It wants you to give up the ghost."

True to Tex's word, Harry didn't see a lock or even a latch on anything. Tex had also been right with how exhausted Harry felt. There was a clock on the wall that was running and said it was only a little past seven in the evening, but there was no way in hell he was going to stay awake much longer, so he set the box with his name on it on top of a dresser in the bedroom (which had walls of lined bricks painted white and exposed wooden beams) before he kicked off his boots and hopped up into the bed. He laid his face down against the pillow, finding it a little dusty, so he started to pull the top sheet back, trying to yank it out from underneath him.

"The hell are you doing?" Stella asked.

"Going to fucking bed," Harry said. "Whatever the hell it is you want to ask me can wait until the goddamn morning." He moved to slide underneath the sheets, laying on one side, reaching over to hit the light switch next to his bed, which plunged the room into relative darkness, although there was a soft purple glow seeping into the room from a neon sign just outside of the window.

"Hey!" Calisto suddenly said loudly, which made Harry glance over only to see Stella stripping down to her bra and panties, tossing the jumpsuit aside. "What the fuck do you think *you're* doing?"

"Getting in bed," Stella said, smugly. "My life depends on this man, so if you think I'm sleeping out on the couch, you are mistaken."

Calisto looked like she was ready to shit bricks, but as Stella was moving to crawl into the bed behind him, she started stripping down as well. Calisto decided to take it one step further, though, and shed her bra and panties as well, exposing her slender and elegant body for any who would look over. Harry could also see a couple of circular scars along the left side of her belly, the sort of pockmark scars left behind by gunshot wounds. He had one himself on the front and back of his left shoulder, just below his collarbone.

As Calisto was crawling into the bed in front of him, he could feel Stella moving to shuck her remaining clothes as well, despite the fact that Harry had just crawled into the bed in the flightsuit he'd been wearing when they through him out of the plane earlier. Once Stella had stripped down to nothing, she pulled Harry to roll onto his back, sliding one of her arms over his chest, just in time with Calisto doing the same with one of hers.

He was fairly certain he was going to be miserable come morning, but the rules of the game had been set and there was nothing left to do but play the hand that had been dealt him. He drifted off to sleep, convinced that by daybreak tomorrow, he'd have a better idea of what was going on.

Instead he woke sometime in the dark middle of the night, a shiver running up his spine as he realized that while Calisto was still asleep next to him with his right arm pinned beneath her neck, he couldn't feel Stella on top of his left arm. That was, of course, when he realized he could feel someone running their tongue along his cock beneath the covers.

Since his left arm was mobile, he used it to lift the sheets enough to peek down, and sure enough, he could see the top of Stella's head as she glanced up at him with a little smile, bringing her index finger to her lips in a shushing motion before turning her gaze back down, sliding her lips down along the length of his dick, Harry having to bite his bottom lip a bit.

Back when he'd first joined Scarab, he'd had a conversation with all of them about how he'd generally been the wheelman for most of his operational work to date. That meant he'd never really been subjected to a full-on frontal assault of a female operative using her charms, and Harry asked them how one went about resisting being influenced by it.

Rin, in typical Rin fashion, had said that if Harry allowed himself to be swayed by a piece of ass, then he'd be dead within a few missions and they'd worry about finding his replacement. Harry had shot back asking if Rin had ever been the piece of ass in question. Rin's smile disturbed him just as much as her reply. "Not that anyone alive can tell you about."

Mick's, by contrast, had gone completely the other direction. He'd pointed out that men and women had been doing this particular dance for as long as there had been men and women, and that men inevitably came up on the short end of the stick. "You're not gonna beat 10 million years of evolution, kid," Mick had told him. "So your best bet is to just be aware of the manipulation and understand the consequences, so you can minimize and manage them, best you can. Don't lose your pants, because you're gonna lose your shirt no matter what."

And Len, the team's founder and de facto leader, who'd been keeping quiet during all of it, had sort of chuckled, giving a little shrug. "Best thing I can tell you, FNG, is that it's enjoyable to take what's being offered, but you gotta make sure you're never giving back *more* than you're being given. It's like working any other asset in our business. You're always gonna have to give'em *something*. But you need to make sure that when the rent comes due, you always got more than you gave, and you never ever gave anything you couldn't afford to lose."

Harry was trying to keep all of that advice swirling around in his head, but in the end, Stella was doing far too good a job bouncing her head up and down onto his cock, her tongue coiling around it each time she drew her head back up, the blanket muffling most of the sound, although he could occasionally hear the wet slurping of her lips puckering on his prick. The sound was at least muted enough that it didn't seem like it was in any risk of waking Calisto.

He was trying to use what he'd learned in terms of how to time and temper his breathing, to control the pace at which Stella was sucking him off, but her fingers were cradling his balls and her tongue was squeezing around the head of his cock, the foreskin pushed back so that she could toy right against his glans.

In his head, he was trying to run all the things he could do to prolong the experience, but it had been a while since he'd had anyone in his bed, and the added thrill of Calisto being naked and asleep pressed up against his side only enhanced the sensations. Before he knew it, he felt like the release was about to hit him, so he reached down to tap on Stella's head, a polite notice that he was about to cum, but instead of backing off, she pushed her head down as far as she could, like she wanted to be sure not to let even a drop of his cum escape her mouth.

That was when things got *strange*.

When his orgasm started to rush through him, he felt Stella's lips lock down hard, but he could feel her starting to vibrate against his leg at the *exact same moment* as Calisto also began to tremble against his side, her lips parted to let one of the most intense moans he'd ever heard pouring right into his neck.

Calisto opened her eyes, an almost wounded expression on her face. "What the fuck was that?" she said to him, as Stella suddenly moved up from beneath the sheet to lay back alongside of him, swallowing his load.

"God, I think I came when you did," Stella said, glancing over to see Calisto's panting face. "What's wrong with her?"

"I came when he did," she whimpered. "I was completely asleep and then suddenly I was awake and orgasming..."

"Wait, what?" Stella said. "Are you saying *we both* came when *he* did?"

From the living room came a loud SHUNK sound, startling all three of them, although Stella hopped out of bed first, running into the living room, glancing around before seeing the capsule inside of the pneumatic tube, a single sheet of paper in it.

Stella opened the chamber, took out the capsule and closed the chamber back up, before opening the capsule, taking out the sheet of paper, reading it as she walked back towards the bed, a

look of consternation on her face. “What the fuck is happening?” she said, holding out the piece of paper to them.

In large printed block letters read a simple message:

“WELCOME TO YOUR NEW LINKED LIFE. 6 DAYS AND COUNTING. -OVERSIGHT”

Stella crawled back into the bed, and both her and Calisto clung to Harry tightly, to calm their anxious nerves down.

Harry's nerves, on the other hand, would run wild until daybreak.

### Rin

Since Len's arrival, it had been easier for the two of them to start building a map of the populated area of the island, however it was strange how the *rest* of the island wasn't reliably the same each time they went out to explore it. Len had argued that she was just imagining it, but she made him count the number of paces to the first reliable landmark and one day it was 56 paces and the next it was consistently 85.

Len had insisted on walking those 85 paces at least five times, there and back, before he finally believed the space was entirely different. That wasn't even the reason Rin had rushed back to the village to grab him, pulling him deeper into the jungle.

“Rin,” Len said with a sigh. “At this point, I'm almost positive there is nothing about this island that is going to throw me for a fucking loop at this point.” They were hiking a good ten minutes before Rin answered him.

“Okay then, boss, you look at *that* and tell me it's not throwing you for a loop,” she said as they came over the hill, looking down into the little ditch where Rin had hidden the thing she'd shot with her bow and arrow about an hour ago.

In the ditch was the corpse of a praying mantis the size of a *pony*, with Rin's arrow jutting out from one of its eyes. Attached to the back of it was a small bundle of machinery about the size of Rin's fist, with a long, singular antenna jutting out like a thin metal spike.

“Huh,” Len said. “You're right. I'm fucking thrown.”

## **Part Five**

### Rin

“It's a big fucking thing, innit?” Rin asked Len. “They aren't supposed to be this big, are they?”

“I'm not an etymologist, but—”

“Entomologist,” she corrected.

That seemed to throw him, because he paused for a long moment before he turned to look at her. “Wait, what?”

“Entomology is the study of insects, chief,” she said. “Etymology is the study of origin of words.”

“Well shit, Len, if you can tell me the difference between those,” he chuckled. “You should know way better than I do.”

“I don't study bugs, boss. Just people.” She was trying to read the expression on his face, but Len had always had a great knack for being impossible to read. That had always frustrated her, but she'd learned that you just had to follow up with him and if he was in a particularly giving mood he'd shade in some of the details that his expression had been hinting towards. “So again I ask, they aren't supposed to be this big, are they?”

“No, Rin,” he said as he crouched down to take a closer look at the giant insect below them. “They are not supposed to be this goddamn big.” His hand reached down and tapped a snarl of machinery jutting from one of its sides. “Nor are they supposed to have electronics grafted onto them, but lo and behold, so it is written, so let it be done.”

“You know what it's for?”

“No,” he sighed. “I've never been the engineer of our lot, and we don't have any sign of Mick showing up yet.” Len tapped at the metal with his fingertip twice, the scrap giving a little ping-ping in response – before sighing deeply. “But I can tell you that in twenty some years of military, paramilitary, semi-military and completely off-the-books military work, I've never seen anything fucking like this damn thing, and if that doesn't scare the crap out of you, well, I'm not sure what will.”

“So we've got an impossibly big bug with a bunch of technology we don't recognize on the outside of it...”

“And it's dead,” Len added.

“*And* it's dead,” she agreed. “But at least we know what did that. I shot it with a fucking arrow and it died. Now what do we *do* with it?”

“I'd love to try and pick it apart, but I don't think we'd learn anything,” he said, sitting down alongside it. “And if we leave it here, they'll know we found it. Burn it, maybe?”

“You sure it'll burn?” She didn't know a whole lot about bugs, but she at least remembered they had exoskeletons, and she wasn't sure exactly how flammable those were. It had never really been a concern to her before now.

He sighed then shook his head. Rin didn't like seeing the chief uncertain. It wasn't an expression he wore often, and it didn't suit him well. “You're right. We don't know that it *would* burn. How far to the water?”

She glanced over at the hill. As with all things involving navigation on the island, whatever estimate she gave him was probably just hoping for the best, although it seemed like most of the changes happened sometime at night, and during any given day things remained mostly the same. Mostly. “We can probably haul it there in just four or five minutes. You think that'll do?”

“It'll have to,” he said.

She nodded her agreement, and while the two of them could've talked about it for a while longer, instead they just got on with it. It wasn't anywhere near as heavy as it looked, so once they each grabbed a piece of it, it wasn't that hard to drag the giant insect away from where it had died and through the trees until they reached a clifftop overlook. Once there she gave it a stern shove with one of her boots and the thing tumbled off, crashing along the rocky sides of the cliff while it fell before making a loud splash tinged with a bit of a crunch as well. It was ... satisfying.

“Never seen anything like it anywhere else on the island,” she said as they started walking along the edge of the cliff parallel to the water, the sounds of waves a hundred feet or so below them. “But then again, the amount of freaky shit I've *already* seen on this island will blow your fucking mind.”

“Like what?”

“Boss,” she sighed. “Trust me when I tell you that you're just gonna have to see most of it for yourself, otherwise you're gonna think I'm going out of my fucking skull. None of it makes any sense, and half the time I have to remind myself that this is all what I'm really seeing. Distances that shrink and grow whenever the fuck they want, buildings that are only there some of the time...”

She saw that caught his attention as he turned to look carefully at her, narrowing his eyes a bit suspiciously. “Buildings that disappear? Really?” He stopped and crouched down for a moment, looking through a handful of stones that were of various shapes and sizes before picking one up. He narrowed his eyes, shifted his arm and then winged it as hard as he could off towards the ocean. He looked almost disappointed when it splashed into the water a good distance away.

“You weren't hoping for some sort of invisible forcefield or something to briefly pop into view, were you?”

He smirked before giving off a slightly guilty chuckle. “Maybe.”

“Little too optimistic, maybe?”

“Yeah, maybe,” he agreed. “But at this point, I'm not going to take anything as a fucking given. Next thing we know, gravity's going to take five and we're going to be flying off towards the skies.”

“God, I hope not. I've gotten rather used to having gravity around. It makes my tits look great.”

“I forgot to ask earlier, Rin, but what the hell were you doing when you shot that damn thing with an arrow?”

“Out hunting for wild pigs,” she told him. “Somebody's gotta get the meat for them to be cooking up in the kitchen and it gives me an excuse to be mobile and constantly exploring the island without anybody asking me too many questions.”

“Pigs are the most common thing you get?”

“Yes and no,” she told him with a shrug. “Sometimes it's weird and exotic shit like bears or mountain lions. That kind of thing.”

“This is not the kind of environment that should naturally have bears or mountain lions on it, Rin,” he told her.

“So *that* much I *did* know, boss, but I'm telling you, there's all sorts of wild shit roaming around on this island,” she said. “I'm pretty sure I've stumbled across what used to be a zoo or an animal research facility at some points, but the damn thing isn't reliably in the same location on any given day, so more or less you're just going to have to stumble onto the fucking thing if you want to go exploring any of it. Maybe the lions and bears came from there.”

“Great. Just fucking great. And here I was hoping we could have a map of the place drawn out long before Mick showed up, just so I could put to rest his bitching and moaning about how hard this job was going to be.”

“Forget it, chief. We're never gonna map this place out in anything other than vague terms, and even then, it's never going to be all that reliable,” she said as they started walking downhill while the land sloped back down towards the water. “I could tell you wanted to try, but you weren't gonna believe me until you saw it with your own two eyes.” She crouched down and picked up a large stick, standing back up, using it as a walking stick. “I also saw you found Mira. How's that going?”

“I'm glad she's okay,” Len said, his voice keeping all of his emotion played closely to the vest. “And she seems like she's mostly who she used to be.”

“Mostly?” Rin said with a scowl. “I can't say I'm a fan of that word, and you didn't used to be either, boss.”

He nodded in agreement. “I'm still not. But there's only so much ourselves any of us can be when we're missing half our memories or more. I'm still trying to decide if that's what has me most concerned about her or if it's the other thing.”

“What's 'the other thing?’”

“She's... something about this place makes her uneasy.”

“Well, shit, boss, it's doing that to all of us.”

“Yeah, except Mira doesn't *get* uneasy. It was one of the things about her that always blew my mind the most,” he said with a tiny blip of laughter. “I've always been playing the part of the hardass, but that girl puts me to shame. Nothing rattles her cage.” He glanced back towards the center of the island, towards the mountain or volcano that seemed to be the only constant in the island's landscape, in seemingly grim admiration. “Least nothing used to. But this place sure does.”

“It rattles everybody, boss. No need to be ashamed of that.”

“It wouldn't have rattled Mira in her old life. That means she isn't entirely my Mira, and I can't trust her like she was.”

“Everybody here's a little different than they used to be, boss,” Rin said to him. “Even I don't feel exactly... what the hell is that?” She stopped in her tracks and pointed down deeper into the valley at a concrete structure in the middle of a field, no high trees anywhere near it, partially covered in heavy vines and salt weathering, a pair of giant painted-green steel doors partially open at one end of it, a small hole in part of the roof, although the size of it was difficult to gauge from the distance. “I've never seen that place before.”

That brought a smile to Len's face, something she was glad to see. She preferred him being

smiling and invincible rather than dragging the weight of his expectations around behind him like he had since his arrival on the island. “That sounds like an invitation for us to go and have a look at it,” he said. “Don't you think?”

“Shit, we'd better not look away, otherwise who the hell knows if it'll still be there?” she laughed. The two of them quickly made their way down the hill towards the open field, heading over towards the building before Rin suddenly raised her fist sharply, sending the silent 'hold in place' signal, which made Len stop in his tracks.

“What's up?”

She pointed to a sign and though he didn't recognize the language or what it said, there was an icon he very much *did* recognize – that of a disc with a small explosion drawn over it. “Looks like a minefield.”

“Shit. Think it goes all the way around the building?”

“Probably,” she said, crouching down to examine the earth a little bit.

Neither of them spoke for a minute or two, considering their situation, but eventually Len ventured forth with an opinion. “Think we should just go see the building anyway?”

She chuckled, looking back over her shoulder at him with a nod. “Read my mind, chief. We just need to take it slow.”

“Or we could try something else instead,” he said as he waved a finger off to the side, where a number of heavy oil drum barrels were busy with the very important job of gathering rust. She immediately caught on to his idea.

The two of them spent half an hour putting together an impromptu system with them rolling barrels out into the field, watching them roll quite some distance before occasionally popping off an old landmine. The explosions weren't especially large, and after a few hours, they'd made enough of a path to get to the building safely.

As they approached the structure, Rin noticed it was relatively undamaged, although there were very old bullet holes in parts of the concrete, peeking out through the heavy foliage around the outside of it. “Whatever happened here, it didn't happen recently,” she said to him.

“And we know the island hasn't always been gun free.”

“Oh, I knew that almost the minute I got here,” she said. “I found spent shell casings littering all over the island. In fact, I'd say the island's probably been under siege at least a couple of times, and from multiple different countries, although nothing in the past twenty or thirty years, maybe a lot longer. Last time this place was being attacked was probably around the time the Berlin Wall fell.”

“Makes sense,” he replied. “If this place had been on anybody's radar recently, it'd look a lot differently. What're you thinking? Armory of some kind? Troop bunker?”

She frowned a little bit as they moved over towards the doorway. “Not sure. Can't imagine it would be something you'd want people coming near a lot if there's a minefield around most of it. Looks like there might have been a roadway here at one point, but even still, this looks like the kind of place you hole up in and don't want to come out of, not the kind of place you need to be in and out of all the time, y'know?”

“Maybe,” he agreed. “No real external markings either, so whoever was here, they weren't going out of their way to advertise which team they were playing for.”

“Might be covered entirely by the foliage, chief.”

“Yeah, suppose that's possible too.”

“There is literally a metric fuckton of it.”

“Glad you clarified,” he said as he started to peek his head around the corner into the building. “There's a shitload of difference between a *metric* fuckton and an *imperial* fuckt– Holy Jesus.” He had leaned in enough to get a peek inside the building and as soon as she could get around the corner behind him, she completely respected why.

The inside of the building looked like it had been some sort of laboratory with a number of open



and empty large steel cages scattered around the interior. There were many kinds of heavy machinery also strewn around the place, but as they moved inside of the building it became clear that at least some of them were antiquated computer parts, the kind from maybe the 1970s at best. Certainly nothing with a modern circuit board on it. No, these were all vacuum tubes and punch cards, although she also saw some magnetic tape strewn around the place, no doubt rendered completely useless by exposure to the elements not to mention all the time that had surely passed since it was last safely encased in its spool housing. Several of the cages had shackles and chains in them with manacles either far too big or far too small for human usage, all of which lay open regardless, some pried open, some ripped open and some, it seemed, opened by the key still resting within them.

That wasn't to say that the place was deserted. Oh no, there were skeletons all over the damn place, most still in parts or pieces of their uniforms. And it looked like after their fight in which, at first glance anyway, Rin had to assume there were *no* survivors, their bodies had been left to rot here. And yet even the most daring of scavenger animals had not been bold enough to come here to feast upon their bodies. Which made the whole puzzle even that more complex.

The uniforms were the hardest thing to figure out. Because based on what they could see even at just a first glance, there were at least four kinds of uniforms here, none of which made *any* sense at all. The first ones she spotted were Nazi uniforms from the 40s, which made some degree of sense considering what she'd suspected about some of the island's history, but the next ones she could identify were North Korean uniforms from the 50s. After that were a couple of American G.I. outfits, but they looked like late 70s or maybe even early 80s. And then there was the last one, colorful and decorative, and so *utterly* out of place. There was only one corpse in the contrasting attire, but that single one stood out like a spotlight because it *so* didn't belong with all the others. Rin crouched down to look at it with wonder, the three colors bright and brilliant, almost as if daring dirt and grime to contaminate their presence. The skeleton within was still clenching onto a pistol with one hand and a knife in the other, a black beret still resting atop the skull, a bullet hole penetrating through part of both.

"What the fuck is a member of the Papal Swiss Guard doing here in the middle of fucking nowhere?" Rin asked out loud, probably not loud enough for Len to hear her, but she was mostly just thinking verbally. "There's, like, a barely more than a hundred of them in the whole goddamn world."

"Rin, I think you better come take a look at this so I'm sure I'm not losing my fucking mind," he called over from behind one of the cages.

"Is it crazier than a member of the Swiss Guard?" she yelled back at him, both of them unable to see the other's position from their obscured locations behind wreckage. "Because I've got one of those over here, and that's pretty fucking weird! So I ask again... crazier than that?"

He paused for a second, as if giving her question genuine consideration before he answered the only way she wasn't expecting him to. "Yes. Yes, I'm pretty sure it is."

That made Rin frown. They were meant to be exploring the building, not playing a fucking game of Top This. She pulled the part of the uniform with the emblem off, the body beneath her apparently a Major at the time of his death, walking over towards where she could see the top of Len's head peeking out from behind some cages. "Okay, what beats a member of his Holiness's private security detail?"

"Cowboy?" Len said, pointing to the body in front of him, a weird grin on his face.

Rin closed her eyes before turning her head to look where he'd been pointing, trying to convince herself that whatever she saw when she opened it would be easily explained and dismissed, somebody wearing attire similar to what Len thought he saw, but not actually *that*.

Then she opened her goddamned eyes.

When she opened them, the body was almost exactly what she feared it would be. The clothing was thick and heavy, totally unlike a *costume* of a cowboy, but in fact like the sort of thing a *real* cowboy would've been wearing. There was a Stetson hat just off to one side, and the body had on thick leather boots that had clearly seen more than their fair share of use, with tiny metal spurs jutting from

the backs of them. There was also a bullwhip hanging from the belt. Like all the bodies, however, the actual firearms were missing. Even the individual bullets from the cowboy's bandoleer had been removed and absconded with. The skull also had a clear bullet hole through it. It seemed like a lot of these bodies did.

"Fucking hell, chief," she sighed, crouching down to inspect the corpse a little further. "I'm all proud of myself because I find a member of the Pope's Fucking Honor Guard and you gotta go find Billy The Fucking Kid."

"The *actual*-?"

"No, not the *actual* Billy the Kid, you twit," she scoffed. "But everything about this guy screams late 1800s to me. No labels on any of the outfits, everything feels handmade. Good odds he was what he looks like he was." She paused to inspect the damage done to him. In addition to the bullet hole in the skull, parts of the jacket had additional holes, stained with dried blood that had seeped into the leather and cotton itself. "Of course, these bullet holes look like they were made something a bit more modern than an old Colt Peacemaker."

"We thinking all these people were in some kind of shoot out... together?"

"I mean," she said, standing up to glance over the room. "Maybe? I can't imagine that if it *wasn't* at the same point that somebody would've come and cleared away these bodies."

"But all of the guns are missing, so *somebody's* been in here since then."

"Not just the guns either," she said. "Grenades, bullets, explosives, even combat knives are missing off the bodies."

"Left the whip, though."

"You know how to use a whip?" she asked him sarcastically.

"Only in my dreams," he sighed. "I dressed up as Indiana Jones for Halloween, like, five different times."

"You can take his whip and start practicing," she told him. "I don't think he's gonna mind."

Len seemed to be considering for the moment then crouched down and took the belt with the whip off the corpse, sliding it and fastening it around his own waist. "Who the hell knows if we're gonna get back here," he said. "Might be now or never."

"You're right. Who knows when we'll be able to get back here," she agreed. "That means we should give this area a pretty thorough search before we head out."

"Can't be here too much longer," he said, gesturing to the fading sun they could see through the doorway. "Anything more than an hour or two and we're going to be trekking back to the city through pitch blackness. Assuming we can still fucking *find* the place anyway. So let's be quick about it."

"You got it, chief."

The two of them spent a bit looking through the machinery, trying to discern what purposes any of it served, but there was so much damage and the parts all thrown together so badly that all they could be sure of was that some sort of testing had been happening here. They also noticed a surprising lack of handwritten notes or paperwork, though. None of the soldiers had any forms of identification on them – no dogtags, no wallets, not even pictures of their loved ones well concealed in some pocket. There were no nameplates or ranks on most of them – it seemed like the member of the Swiss Guard had been an exception – and nothing seemed to give any real indication of who was here first, who had been attacking, how they had gotten here, what they'd been looking for or who'd taken all the guns.

There was also no clear indication what had caused the hole in the roof, which looked larger than it had from the distance, although still no bigger than maybe the size of a car. It had looked like it might have been mortar fire at first. They'd grown more concerned after a few minutes inspection when both of them had reached the same conclusion – it had been broken *outward* from the *inside* and neither of them could find a blast point of origin, nor explosives residue.

Each minute they spent inside the bunker made Rin feel even less comfortable than she already was with the place, and they'd barely explored the front quarter of it. There was a lot more real estate

going back into the darkness that they hadn't set foot on, because neither of them had a flashlight with them. She preferred staying closer to the light seeping into the building, even surrounded by the dead as she was.

“Ho-lee *shiiiiiiit*,” she heard Len say from over her shoulder while she was giving one of the corpses a very thorough search, looking for anything identifiable at all. “You better come over and take a look at this. And if you see a backpack or a bag of some kind, bring it with you.”

She stood up and looked to find him just on the edge of the light towards the middle of the bunker, standing next to a giant pallet with a heavy tarp over it. She knew one of the American soldiers had a satchel bag along side him, so she headed over to that body, scooped it up then started making her way back towards the palate. “I don't know what you want to haul back, boss. Remember we can't lock anything up anyway.”

“I think just hiding a few of these or, y'know, keeping them with us at all times wouldn't be too much of a bad thing, especially considering we don't know how to get back here easily,” he said, as he lifted up the tarp.

The sudden reflection of light caught her off guard and she had to raise one of her hands to block the glare before stepping forward to prevent the light from behind her casting down into it so she could see clearly, although once she could, she wasn't entirely convinced she wasn't hallucinating. “No *fucking* way,” she muttered beneath her breath.

Beneath the tarp, stacked nearly shoulder high, in a square shape about eight feet to a side, were hundreds and hundreds of gold bricks. Len picked one up of the top and it had clear weight to it as he turned to show her inscribed on top of the brick a pontiff's hat flanked by an upside key crossed beneath it to form an x shape. “The Holy See,” he told her. “It's the Pope's insignia. I guess we know why there was a member of the Swiss Guard here. This is Vatican gold.”

“Vatican gold? Cowboys? Nazis? Giant mecha bugs? What the unholy fuck have you gotten us into, chief?” she sighed, although she was reaching to pull a couple of gold bricks to slide into the bag as she said it.

“Believe me, Rin, if I had any clue, I would absolutely tell you. But I think it's safe to say that whatever the fuck we expected to be on this place, all of this,” he said, gesturing the bunker around them. “This was definitely *not it*.”

With six bricks slung into a bag, they made their way back out the way they came in, and when they were about half way up the hill, they both looked back to see that not only the building but the entire clearing behind them had disappeared and been replaced by a sloping incline covered in dense palm trees.

Rin was *certain* she heard Len grumbling about fucking quantum relocation the entire eventless hike back the rest of the way to the village.

### Harry

The sun was starting to go down on his second day on the island, and Harry was no closer to a decision now than he was when he'd woken up that morning. He'd been looking forward to getting out and exploring the island a bit by himself, but the minute he was up and out of bed, it became clear that neither Calisto nor Stella wanted to let him out of their sights.

They talked to him while he was on the toilet taking his morning shit, one of them sitting on the countertop, the other using the shower. While *he* was in the shower, one of them joined him while the other was waiting taking *her* turn on the counter top.

When the three of them had headed out to get some breakfast, he found that one of them was always walking in front of him and the other was always walking behind him, and neither of them were all that talkative when they were moving between places.

At the canteen, at least, they were willing to be a bit more chatty. The two women had apparently decided that to get a little from Harry, they were going to need to give a little. “Fine, since

everybody's dancing around it, I'll go first," Calisto said. "Calisto obviously isn't my real name, but it's all I'm going to give anyone here. I'm SIED. You two?"

"I was with South Korea's National Intelligence Service for five years, but I left them three years ago to go private sector," Stella told them. "Stella's my real first name. At least... I think it is? I can't remember my last name, nor can I remember who in the private sector I was *working for* for the last few years. I was with Wildneedle Securities for a year or so, but their quartermaster was a dick who wouldn't stop hitting on me, so I bailed with them and went... shit, where did I go?"

Harry smiled softly. "I wouldn't worry too much about it. You're going to find giant holes in your memory no matter how you slice your bread. We all are. Somehow we got sent to The Retreat."

"What the hell is The Retreat?" Calisto asked.

"Consider it the spy equivalent of sending your pet upstate to live on a farm," Harry laughed. "It's supposed to be a myth, a place where any spy who's gone missing has been taken to. But it's not real. At least, I didn't think it was up until we got here. Because it pretty closely matches all the stories I've ever heard about The Retreat."

"Which were?"

"Just little bits and bobs here and there. Deserted island somewhere remote. No real weapons to speak of. No visible martial forces. Just a weekly supply drop from the sky and fuck all else."

"So we shared some, limey," Stella said. "Your turn. Spill."

"Harry isn't my real name, but it's all you're going to get, because I can't remember any *other* names," he sighed. "I used to be with Five..."

"Five?" Calisto said.

"MI-5," Stella filled in.

"Ah."

"Anyway," Harry continued. "I was with MI-5 for about three years before we had something of a severe falling out."

"What over?" Stella prodded.

"You know, I don't remember? Anyway, after that, I went out on my own and started selling the best skill I had."

"Being evasive?" Calisto grumbled.

"In a way," Harry said with a grin. "Evasive transportation. Smuggling and security, getting things and people from one point to another without being noticed and/or caught. If it's got wheels, I can drive it. If it's got wings, I can fly it."

"Boats?"

"Speedboats, sail boats, submarines, shipping vessels... don't know there's a craft out there I wouldn't at least have the fundamentals down on."

"You're a very arrogant man, you know that?" Calisto said to him.

"Doubtful," Harry chuckled. "Because while I'm very good at transportation and I'm not a half-bad shot, I'm pretty crap at just about everything else. Never was much good at disguises or cover identities. Maddeningly, never picked up those skills needed to spot tells and detect when folks are lying," he blatantly lied to them. "So yeah, can get you and your stuff from A to B and keep you safe while I'm doing it, but rely on me for anything beyond that and you're going to be in a spot of bother."

The food at the cantina wasn't exactly amazing, but it was certainly better than he'd had in a lot of other places. It seemed like there were generally three or four things on offer at any rough point in the day, so there were always options. The kitchen area was also open to anyone, so if nothing was on offer that appealed, the option of going back and making something was also available.

"Is there enough money to be had in smuggling?" Stella asked him with a gentle smile. It seemed like Stella was going for the softer approach while Calisto was trying to treat him with harder caution.

"Loads," he said. "But it's all reliant on you actually *getting* the gigs, which is where the real

trick comes into play. I've got a contact for that, but they don't always come through.”

“So what do you think we did to get sentenced here?” Calisto asked, suddenly pivoting subjects on them. “And who the hell do you think Oversight is?”

“Bunch of lunatics if you ask me.”

“That's not helpful,” Calisto snapped, reaching up to slap her hand against the back of his head. When he leaned forward in sharp pain, he noticed that both Stella and Calisto had done the same thing. “Fucking hell! What the hell happened?”

“You hit me,” Harry grumbled.

“And me!” Stella chimed in.

“I didn't lay a finger on you, Stella!” Calisto countered. “And you hit me back!”

“I did no such thing!”

The two began to bicker back and forth and while Harry could hear them shouting at one another, his mind was already racing onto a different path, replaying the moment and the timing in his head. There wasn't any possible way Calisto could've hit Stella or that Stella could've hit Calisto in return. In fact, there was only one thing Harry could think of that made any sense. So he'd have to do something truly stupid to prove it.

He placed his left hand on top of the table, closed his right hand into a fist and brought it down hard on top of his left hand. He may have known the pain was coming, but neither Calisto nor Stella had any idea what was about to happen.

As soon as the pain bloomed in his left hand, he saw Calisto and Stella each clutch at their own left hand, as if they'd been struck themselves. “Fuckin' hell!” Stella said. “What was that?”

“Ladies, I think we're a bit more linked than originally expected,” he sighed. “Let's go back to our room, and I can demonstrate a bit further.”